

# **Zen Buddhism for anybody**

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Um paraíso não pode ser criado, nem desfeito*

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**Daniel Abreu de Queiroz**

# Zen Buddhism For Anybody

Vol. II:  
A paradise cannot be created,  
nor can it be undone

Belo Horizonte  
Author's Edition  
2021

*to Hachisuke,  
an Untouchable*

## Intro



"SELF-PORTRAIT"  
EGON SCHIELE - AUSTRIAN (1911)

On a German TV show from the 60's – being interviewed by a Buddhist monk – Heidegger briefly exposes a pervading, mostly unnoticed anomaly in Western thought.

It starts as he explains the relation between modern philosophy and modern technology. Here, he quotes the physicist Max Planck:

*"Reality is only that which can be measured."*

This embryonic idea, he says, was originally introduced by Descartes; the "father" of modern Western philosophy.

Heidegger is very proud as he remarks:

*“Our modern technology emerges from modern philosophy; [...] the idea that ‘reality is only accessible to humans if it is measurable in the sense of mathematical physics’ represents the source of all modern technology.”*

This is quite correct.

A couple of minutes later, however, a very preoccupied philosopher (literally, two minutes later) remarks: “*We are in danger... Our society has to ponder on the nature of human beings,*” he says, “*because we have recently become governed by technology and some day humans will be turned into controlled machines...*”

This sudden change in tone, while speaking of the same technology, is very significant. It is also ironic that Heidegger (as most Western thinkers) cannot recognize this problem of “humans turning into machines” as the natural offspring of that very same thought he was previously praising:

*“Reality is only that which can be measured.”*

One cannot argue with fanatics, for those will always have the tools (all the necessary questions and answers) so their fanaticism won’t change. This is not limited to the study of language. Any paradigm shift in science will always be rejected by many scholars, overly attached to the broken model. People who are not too attached to “reality as measurements”, on the other hand, should take nothing more than a few pointers before realizing the insurmountable inconsistencies surrounding that proposition. It is a ghost from a dead age, still haunting us and making us lose our way.

This fundamental mistake about language lingers on, as a paradigm, because “people are watchful in busily investigating what they do not know, but not watchful in investigating the things they already know.”

Let’s correct it ourselves:

*Reality* – whatever that is – can be accessed only by *mathematical measurements*? But these are “symbolic representations in the human mind” – which, by nature, are “subjective formations”, necessarily different from the “objective, material reality” they were supposed to grant, according to the people who came up with this idea.

Let us take further steps back: what does “measuring” *mean*? We all know *how to do it*, but *what is it*?

We go: “This object here weights so many pounds. It has a length of so and so... This many inches over there, a certain angle over here...”

What is this? “Humans accessing reality”, or “humans painting pictures with their language”? Isn’t “measuring” more like writing an entry for a given object, in a particular kind of dictionary?

“Measuring” is a form of symbolically building imaginary things, meant to *represent* real things in our language.

In science, “definitions” and “measurements” are to be constructed after careful and controlled observation; still, the *ideas in the human mind* cannot transcend their intrinsic nature as ideas, or language, and magically turn into More Real Than Stones, or The Gate to Reality, only by means of “careful observation”. That’s silly.

Their nature remains ever the same. The drawings are simply becoming more detailed; more representative. They never stopped being representations. So *Reality* is “only that which can be reflected upon a mirror”?

Before measuring magnetic force and gamma rays (before having machines that could attribute numbers to them, so we could paint their detailed image in our language) those were not “real”?

Lavoisier – the 18th century French chemist, famously credited by a Brazilian student on the Internet as “the inventor of oxygen” – once was questioned about the “mysterious” (back then) meteorites (as we call them now) and he was very assertive about “scientific reality”:

*“It’s impossible that stones could fall from the sky, because there are no stones in the sky.”*

Is this the attitude that “alone can let humans access reality”, or is it only something useful in building and replicating machines?

We still have no machines that will spread love and hate, or anger and joy over a table and measure it with tape... So these are not real, uh?

No wonder most try to love and can’t do it; that some can’t deal with anger, or even with joy...

But the drawing of a dog, thoroughly measurable, is actually *Real*? No wonder alienation keeps on spreading, with so many people having a hard time telling fantasy from the truth.

Our science and philosophy, unfortunately,

have thrown away the tools to recognize their own limits; they have been founded over the mistaken idea of defining “reality” as “only that which can be conveniently manipulated by our method”; that is, only those things that are liable to be reproduced in socially sharable, historically cumulative symbols; endowed with objectivity, universality and transmissibility; liable to be methodically structured in theories.

Take the murmuring of any passing river, for example; it meets none of those requirements. Is it not real? Could an orgasm be transmitted by math, or measurements? I guess you can measure the speed of the blood flow, or the temperature of the skin – but these are not “an orgasm”. It cannot be explained by language, before you feel it.

This problem might seem insignificant, but it is reproduced everywhere, corrupting everything; like a virus. It is a problem of misunderstanding language for human self, or even God.

Our language (not “some conventional code, traditional to this or that group of humans”, but *language itself*: the human faculty of symbolic representation) is indisputably a marvelous ability; but no Sacred Oracle, or All Seeing Eye.

Bats have at least one incredible skill too: their hearing, which seems to be unique to them. Do they consider “real” only the things they can hear? I don’t think so. How could them bats listen to the sunlight? Still, we notice by their behavior that days and nights seem real enough to them.

With its amazing eyesight, the eagle would corner itself into a tight spot, if it came to believe

that “only what I see is real”. An eagle certainly cannot see the air; but it skillfully glides in it.

Why should humans discard as “unreal” what doesn’t fit into their greatest skill? Our language is nothing but a tool in which we have significant advantage – like the hearing of the bats, the venom from the snake, or the spider’s net.

Other animals too, clearly have a faculty of symbolic representation, but nothing close to ours; nothing worthy of being called a “language”.

If some humans have even higher linguistic skill than others, like Heidegger, Max Planck, or Descartes, good for them! Dive in it! Build us a couple of machines. It works! But when they start “teaching” others that *“my advantage in human language is sacred, and the only access to reality,”* their “science” and “philosophy” turn into another anthropocentric religion, and the whole “objectivity” of the enterprise becomes a joke.

Even the “human sciences” – supposed to compensate for the “lack of reality” surrounding those phenomena strongly influencing us, but not liable to be measured with scale and tape – from their very beginnings, have been noticed to operate under *“a normalizing inflection, bending its project to the needs of legitimizing power, of reproducing prejudices and common sense, and of establishing therapeutic tasks; restricting the discourse of the human sciences to predominantly injunctive, prescriptive and normative figures.”*

Of course I have found no long term, deep human satisfaction studying science and philosophy. You also haven’t. Nobody has. It is not there.

A lot of wonderful things are in there; I myself love some of them; but concerning Reality, life and the deepest nature of human beings, our science and philosophy are “sticks born crooked”. They can only deal with measurable things. Not enough.

A “philosophy” meant only to build machines, disdainful of the unmeasurable (a huge chunk of our world and experience), has little to offer against my philosophical, human doubts. It turns humans into machines. Its “wisdom” is pain.

Zen Buddhism is about *reality*; not *ideas*. It unfolds the highest form of philosophy; one about life and real humans; not symbols and machines.

Stuff like semiotics, behaviorism, math and epistemology are nothing but linguistic toys that we carry in our pockets; “golden cloths in a dream.”

I’ve found no satisfaction in religion either, for this word, as I grew up, meant exclusively the Catholic faith, and the Christian view of things has always felt alien to me; like an explanation about some other world, different from the one I live in.

So, at some point, I felt sort of “expelled” from all the clubs around my hut and, lost in the woods, I was trying to understand the world alone.

Eventually, I read “Trust in your own Heart”, by the Third Patriarch of Zen, with the feeling of drinking a sweet, refreshing juice – it was about transcending language; not worshiping it, being controlled by it and searching for “reality” in it.

Thirstily reading verse by verse, I discovered I was never alone – I was actually preceded by many generations of people way more talented

than me, who felt like me, thought like me and had already investigated those thoughts and feelings to depths I could never reach by myself, even if I had been given some five hundred human lives to try it.

Along the following years, as I learned about the Way and improved my practice, I've developed a relation of trust and gratitude in relation to Zen Buddhism that I wouldn't even try to express with words. There are no words to express it.

And this is how I became (or had to recognize myself as) a Zen Buddhist – it is my religion, even though I was previously very determined on not having one. I simply had to accept it. To me, Zen Buddhism gave meaning to the word “sacred”.

However, Zen Buddhism is *not* a religion; at least, as far as Pilates is not a religion. It *could be* a religion for you, just as Pilates can also work as a religion to some; but it doesn't *have* to be one. Zen is a very peculiar form of Buddhism. Think of televangelists and mendicant Franciscans – both are Christians, but very differently. In its core, Zen Buddhism is not a religion, but a practice; a certain know-how. It's like riding a bike.

Many Christians have found satisfaction in Zen, without abandoning any of their Christian beliefs. There are also many Muslims, Jews and atheists; philosophers and pub owners; drunkards and teetotalers; fascists and saints; charitable nuns and murderous *kunoichis* [female ninjas].

Zen Buddhism is like a 99 cent store that will indiscriminately offer its treasure to anyone; a treasure without junk, cost, or mock jewelry.

Sit down, with your back straight, or maybe lie down, or go out for a walk, for a swim, for a climb... Sing, paint and plant; fight, love and dance while completely engaged into the now; with a certain form of consciousness that embraces everything and entangles itself to nothing – like the water in a fast moving river. Abandon attachments, fears, goals and plans. Plunge into the flow of the now. In Zen Buddhism, this is meditation.

When you're feeling lost, confused, or blocked, come and read some more "fingers pointing at the Way". Then forget about reading; forget words and abandon thinking... Back to meditation; back to being alive; back to *reality*.

Our language is like an Internet – a tool and a playful toy; a raft we can board to reach the Other Shore; a Google Maps to find the road.

It is not the road; not the Other Shore. What we really want to do is to reach an actual place, after abandoning the raft, or the computer screen. We want to find real land, if possible, at some point.

The sky outside my window is so beautiful now. It is singing 80 thousand verses each second – how could I describe it, one symbol at a time? The clouds, up there, are true adepts. They have never tried measuring anything.

Enjoy the strawberry and move on.

Speed up!

Find realization today; instantly.

Belo Horizonte, Brazil  
Daniel Abreu de Queiroz

That which is heavy supports that which is light

Have you ever seen a person who is eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old? Delicate and frail; gnarled like an old pine, bent over a cane; tired and staggering, tottering, hobbling, faltering, limping; their youth is a distant memory and their teeth are missing; their hair is thin and white, if any; their skin is wrinkled and spotted.

And did it never hit you hard that this is waiting for all of us; that nobody could escape it?

Have you ever seen a person who is suffering? Gravely ill, they are lying over their own filth; carried by some and washed by others; moaning, groaning, crying, sobbing, wailing; their body is shaking and their face is contorted.

And did it never hit you hard that this is waiting for all of us; that nobody could escape it?

Have you ever seen a person who is dead? One, two or three days after departure; cold, stiff, swollen, purple; putrefied...

And did it never hit you hard that this is waiting for all of us; that nobody could escape it?

Now imagine a wise person, sitting by the Ganges; carefully observing the tiny, countless bubbles over the current.

After doing it for a long time, this person would see those bubbles as having no personal identity; their fundamental nature would appear to be the nature of what is empty – the nature of what is illusory and has no substance.

This is exactly how an adept contemplates all

physical phenomena, all feelings, all thoughts, all mental states and every form of consciousness – be they from the past, at present, or in the future; either close by, or far away – and after watching them carefully, they are seen as empty, indifferent and devoid of identity.

There are three fundamental principles:

Every phenomenon is transitory.

All living beings are subject to suffering.

None among the ten thousand things constitutes an isolated, independent entity.

Thus, whatever was smelled, seen, tasted, heard, felt or imagined – be it from the past, at present, or in the future; internal or external, heavy or light, superior or inferior, close by or far away – must be understood in relation to actual reality and true wisdom:

“This does not belong to me. This is not who I am. This is not my identity.”

## The runaway horse

A farmer counted on his horse to help him in a variety of tasks. When the animal ran away, the neighbors heard about it and visited him with consoling words:

“What a pity!”

The farmer was indifferently chewing on the edge of his pipe and replied only:

“We shall see...”

Next morning, out of his own free-will, the runaway horse had returned to the farm; besides, he was accompanied by three wild horses who, for some reason, had formed a bond with him. The neighbors soon arrived to celebrate:

“How very lucky!”

But the farmer, once more, had the same view:

“We shall see...”

On the third day, the farmer’s son was trying to tame one of the wild horses, when the animal threw him to the ground and he broke a leg. The neighbors naturally came again, to lament:

“How unfortunate!”

The farmer, unshakable, only echoed himself:

“We shall see...”

Next morning, officers from the army arrived at the village – recruiting young soldiers to feed, with their own blood, another savage and empty war. Noticing one of the boys had a broken leg, they left him behind.

Delighted with the turn of events, again the neighbors visited the farmer to congratulate him, but he only said:

“We shall see...”

## The barbarian with large round eyes

Bodhidharma: a monk from India. For some reason, he walked all the way to China, where he received lodgings at a Shaolin temple.

Why?

Who knows?

Why does the sun set?

To whom does the flower bloom?

There was no Zen, no Chan – this is how it all started. Just an Indian Buddhist monk, being hosted by some Chinese Buddhist monks.

It is said that Bodhidharma's beard was very thick and that his temper was terribly rough. Soon he would leave the temple (and it is not clear if he decided to do so, or if he was expelled by the other monks). The bearded barbarian from the West isolated himself in a nearby cave, where he would spend the next nine years practicing some "strange" sitting meditation, staring at a stone wall.

He had no disciples. He wrote no books. He gave no lectures. He pursued his path alone, with his legs crossed in sitting meditation, staring at the wall.

Eventually, his neighbors took notice of him, attributing some spiritual authority to his practices – certainly without his encouragement, and probably even without his consent.

Even the emperor, an ardent admirer of saints and a great advocate of Buddhism, heard of the "wise bearded barbarian doing sitting meditation" and sent him an invitation to his castle; which Bodhidharma refused. The emperor then sent a

second invitation, a more elaborate one, but again Bodhidharma refused him. Finally, the emperor dispatched a troop of guards, who forced the monk to visit him.

In the glorious palace, very proud of himself, the emperor told the wrong person:

“I have built many Buddhist temples and also sponsored the wellbeing of countless monks! I have raised a hundred statues of the Buddha and payed dearly so a great number of sutras could be copied and translated to our language... From your saintly perspective, how big is the spiritual merit of those who practice such compassionate actions?”

Bodhidharma replied:

“No merit.”

The emperor felt thwarted in his expectations:

“If there is no merit, nor spiritual award for doing so much good and spreading the word of Buddhism, what exactly is this *higher truth* you practice?”

The barbarian said:

“The nose is vertical. The eyes are horizontal.”

The emperor sneered:

“If everything is so prosaic, why are you called a saint? In other words, if this is all, then who are you?”

Bodhidharma said:

“I don’t know.”



"DARUMA"  
["BODHIDHARMA" PRONOUNCED IN JAPANESE]  
KANO SANRAKU - JAPAN (CA. 1630)

## The first childbirth of Zen

Back to solitary meditation in his cave, it was a very cold day when someone arrived, crossing the freezing snow to have an interview with the Bearded Barbarian from the West.

The visitor was a very important man in the army – on top of that, a famous scholar, noted throughout the whole empire as one of the leading academic authorities in Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. However, in his own heart he felt himself a loser; unable to understand the Way and to find the inner peace he longed for.

Bodhidharma briskly refused his request of becoming a disciple, saying that he wasn't the kind of person to have students. Before resuming his meditation, he told the visitor to go away.

But the visitor wouldn't leave. He spent the whole night by the entrance of the cave, as the snow slowly covered his body. By morning, Bodhidharma asked him:

“What is it that you want?”

“I want to open the gates of compassion and to release all living beings from suffering.”

The bearded Indian was a rude man:

“And how can you expect to practice any real Buddhism with such a meager virtue, no wisdom at all, a conceited heart and this presumptuous spirit?”

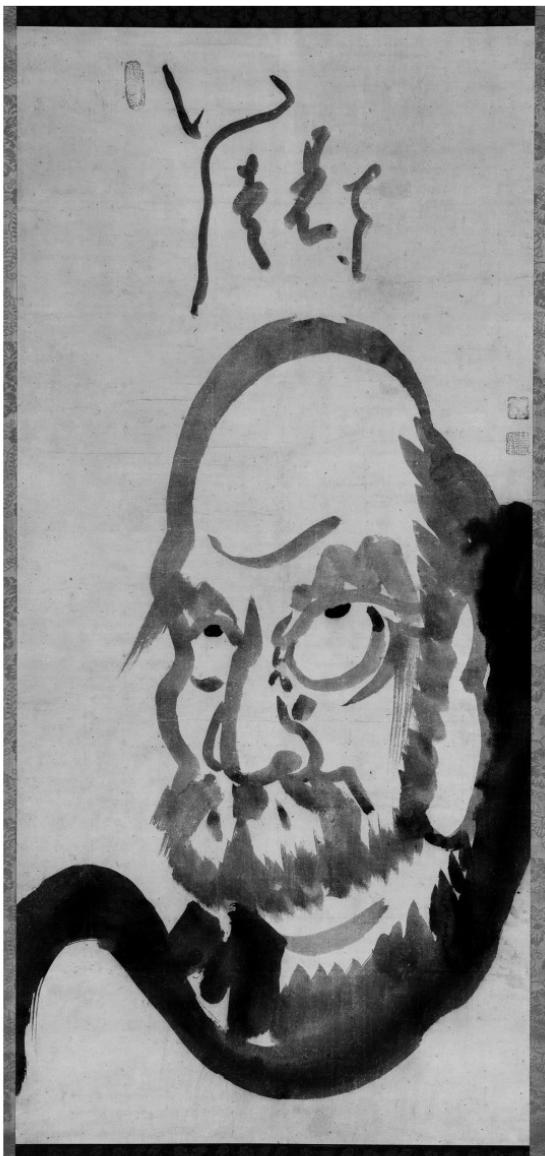
Later, it would become clear that the visitor himself was quite aware of all those faults that Bodhidharma immediately saw in him – he was actually tormented by them, while the clerical “authorities” of the time considered him a great

enlightened sage.

Unable to find the Way in scriptures and sutras, the renowned, afflicted scholar recognized in Bodhidharma, finally, the true knowledge that he sought. However, the one carrying that “lamp” was a harsh, reclusive man, who had no intention of becoming a teacher.

With no other means to express his heart, the student applicant drew his sword and cut off one of his own arms, offering it to Bodhidharma as a proof of his sincerity.

This one-armed monk would later be renamed as Huike, by Bodhidharma, before becoming the Second Patriarch of Zen Buddhism (which, without Huike’s talent and sacrifice, would probably have disappeared inside some Chinese cave, with its first lonely, intractable master.)



"PORTRAIT OF DARUMA"  
HAKUIN - JAPAN (CA. 1750)

There you go...

With his wounds treated and finally accepted as a disciple, Huike opened himself up to the First Patriarch:

“I live in a deplorable state of anxiety, master. Please, could you ease my mind?”

Bodhidharma, angrily disgusted by the belief in “supernatural powers”, through which a priest was supposed to magically ease other people’s minds, proposed a curious method:

“Why don’t you bring me your mind here, so I can ease it for you?”

Dumbstruck, Huike admitted:

“When you put it like this, master, I am not able to bring my mind to you...”

Bodhidharma briskly closed the matter:

“Then I have already eased it.”

Upon hearing these words, Huike attained some understanding.

## Please, absolve my sins

Years later, when Huike had his first meeting with the student who'd eventually be recognized by him as the Third Patriarch, their conversation was pretty ironic.

But why ironic? Because the Second Patriarch found himself in a very similar situation to the one he had created himself, upon first inquiring Bodhidharma. However, now he was occupying the opposite end of the table.

The man who one day would receive the name of Sengcan – recognized by Huike as “the disciple who surpassed all other disciples” – hitherto had been a desperate, tormented and lost person in search of salvation.

After visiting gurus and masters from several schools, hurt and holding some lingering guilt, Sengcan finally met the Second Patriarch of Zen when he was already feeling at rock bottom and destined to fail. Shedding tears, he confided:

“Master, I live in a deplorable state, being consumed by my sins... I beg you to absolve them for me.”

Huike was probably very aware of the irony in that question. I guess he smiled as he said:

“Sure! Why don’t you bring me your sins here, so I can absolve them for you?”

After a long pause, suddenly in a good mood, Sengcan said:

“When you put it like this, I can’t find my sins and bring them here to you.”

The master tenderly closed the matter:  
“Then I have already absolved them.”

## Straight ahead

Now, back to Huike's training under Bodhidharma. After some years together, both were climbing the track to a mountain's peak, when the master abruptly stopped and asked:

“Where are we going, after all?”

“Please, master, just continue straight ahead.”  
Bodhidharma said:

“If you want to go straight ahead, you shouldn't move a single step.”

Hearing this, Huike was enlightened.

## The transmission of the lamp

Broken the initial barrier, Bodhidharma would even come to accept other disciples besides Huike. One day, out of the blue, the Red-Bearded Barbarian told his students it was time for their good-byes, for he was going back to India.

Before parting, however, the master asked them to express their understanding of the Way, so he could evaluate their attainment one last time.

Dao Fu said:

“Words and ideas cannot contain the Way; nor is the Way apart from words and ideas.”

Bodhidharma said:

“You share my skin.”

The nun Zong Chi said:

“Realizing the Way is like reaching a glorious Buddha Land; a single look, and we immediately awaken.”

Bodhidharma said:

“You share my flesh.”

Dao Yu said:

“The four elements are empty. The Five Skandhas form no separate, independent entities. There is no attainment. There is no Way.”

Bodhidharma said:

“You share my bones.”

Huike said nothing, but made a deep bow to the master, in silence, and returned to his seat.

Bodhidharma said:

“You share my heart.”

## An ontological principle

After receiving “the transmission of the lamp” from Bodhidharma, Huike would spend some years wandering freely, working for others and helping people wherever needed. When he felt he was ready, he started teaching.

The Second Patriarch of Zen lived in a very turbulent period in China, for the ruling dynasty had collapsed under protests and revolts. The new powers – influenced by rival religions – decided Buddhism had gathered too much power and started a persecution of its members and temples.

Thus, from “society’s darlings”, Buddhists suddenly became enemies of the motherland. One can notice here (and in plenty other examples), how absolutely right was the historian who first suggested ‘a succession of great surprises in their own time is usually distorted by history books, given to present them as something inevitable.’

Concomitant to this, even the Buddhists themselves, from various other schools, were also persecuting the Second Patriarch of Zen; harassing him for the novelty in his approach to Buddhism (some say also jealous of the large crowds which would gather around Huike, to hear him preach).

According to legend, an assassin was once hired to infiltrate the master’s monastery and kill him – but the spy was enlightened by Huike and became one of his followers.

Apart from legend, however, evil people are usually the ones coming out victorious in worldly matters; the rulers of a sick society, and losers in everything else. People talk of “ambition” or greed

nowadays as a high virtue! But anyone can take a look at the “winners” and laugh, or cry. So also these enemies and conspirators would finally take the Second Patriarch’s head; sentenced to death by the local magistrate, on charges of “heresy”.

At the time of his execution, Huike was said to be 107 years old.

Nothing but a few fragments of texts written by his own hand have reached us. The following is a surviving piece of a letter, delivered to one of his students:

“You have understood the Dharma for what it is – its deepest revelation lies in an ontological principle; that is, a principle related to the very nature of things. It is only because of ignorance that the Mani-jewel can be confused with a brick. However, after awakening to enlightenment, we realize that everybody carries the true jewel. The ignorant ones and the enlightened ones share the same substance; it would be really impossible to separate them. It must be realized that things are One, just exactly as they are. Those dividing the world in dualisms are to be pitied and I write these explanations to help them. When we are awakened to the fact that absolutely nothing is separating this body from the Golden Body of the Buddha, what reason is there to struggle in vain, searching for a paradise elsewhere?”



"HUIKE IN MEDITATION"  
SHI KE - CHINA (950)

## Trust in your own heart

After acknowledging Sengcan as his successor and giving him the robe and bowl received from Bodhidharma, Huike also advised his disciple to spend some time hidden in the mountains; both to deepen his practice and to avoid the persecution of Buddhism.

Sengcan found himself a hiding place on Huan Quan – where, as legend has it, the famous and fearsome tigers from the region, who were used to attacking hunters and farmers in the mountain, were suddenly tamed by the master’s arrival. This is certainly a silly fabrication from some unknown chronicler. I’ve included it here as a curious note, as we don’t really have much information about these patch-robed monks, living in seclusion such a long time ago.

Though information about his personal life is lacking, Sengcan is the famous author of the first popular Zen scripture – a text much appreciated to this day, roughly fifteen hundred years later, for its clarity and simplicity.

The title of this text (*Trust in your own heart*) was answering a ‘slogan’ from another Buddhist school, which was very popular before Zen and still remains very popular today because of its simplicity. It is the Pure Land School, which preaches and advises to simply *trust in the Amida Buddha*.

This “Amida Buddha” is a celestial Buddha, or a deity. In other words, the Pure Land school is a devotional school of Buddhism, which stresses

the power of faith in the compassion of a transcendental, heavenly being. Enlightenment could be reached by having faith in this godly Buddha and by calling his name.

The answer of the new “Chan” school was very clear: if you want to find the Way, forget about gods and demons...

### Trust in your own heart

Come and join the Perfect Way,  
It is very simple;  
Just abstain from partialities.  
When love and hate are abandoned,  
Everything is revealed with no disguise.

At the slightest bias, however,  
Heaven and Earth are separated.  
If you want to see the truth by yourself,  
Stop nurturing opinions;  
Both favorable and unfavorable.

Internal war of what displeases you,  
Against that which you call pleasing;  
This is the sickness of the mind.  
Before the experience of the Way is realized,  
You keep on struggling in vain.

The Perfect Way is like space itself;  
Where nothing is lacking  
And nothing exceeds.  
When we choose to hold or to push away,  
We neglect the nature of things.

Don't lose yourself  
In the confusion of the external world;  
Don't lock yourself  
In the experience of inner emptiness.  
Peacefully abide in the unity of all things;  
Dualisms will clear away by themselves.

If you try forcing your movements  
Into a still passivity,  
This effort of phony passivity itself  
Is movement.  
Squeezed between such illusory dualities,  
Who could ever discover what is real?

Both denial and agreement  
Lead you astray from the Way:  
Negating the world of relative forms  
Turns into its very affirmation;  
Affirming the original inner emptiness  
Becomes its own negation.

It is only because of ignorance  
That most are interpreting as real  
The empty transformations over the mirror.  
So don't exhaust yourself  
Searching for reality;  
Simply cut your attachments  
To all opinions.

You must return to the Root,  
To know up from down;  
Chasing appearances  
Is neglecting their source.

Enlightenment means Unity:  
Not forms,  
Not emptiness,  
But something else.

Carefully avoid differentiation;  
When yes and no  
And right and wrong are born,  
The unity of the mind is covered  
By mists of confusion.

The Two is formed over the One;  
But don't get biased even towards this One.  
When the mind is undisturbed on the Way,  
The ten thousand things could do no harm.

If a single eye is never asleep,  
Dreams clear away by themselves.  
When the mind abides in the Absolute,  
Ten thousand things are One.  
Realizing the deep mystery of the One,  
External offenses  
Immediately become empty.

When the ten thousand things  
Are seen as one,  
We are back to the place  
Where we've always been.

One in all,  
And all in One;  
If only this was understood,  
Nobody would have to cry  
About not being perfect.

When the Way and each way are not divided,  
And every way and the Way are one,  
We have reached the frontier beyond which  
All the words fail;  
For this is not the past,  
Not the present,  
Not the future.

## To Hachisuke, an Untouchable

Silver and gold,  
Titles and power;  
It all returns to heaven and earth.

Gain and lost,  
Rich and poor;  
This is all fundamentally empty.

Emperors and farmers,  
Saints and sinners;  
All end up the same.

We are all connected  
At the whirlwind of being.

Alas, it is so sad...  
The beggar from the Ryogoku Bridge,  
Who lost his life in a tragic flood...

If you ask me where he's at, I'll tell you:  
In the heart of the moon  
Reflected over these waves.

A finger showed me the moon

Facing the cliffs.  
The moon was shining.

At the natural source,  
Forms emerged;  
Light won't reach.

The unobstructed mind is clear.  
The empty cave hides a mystery.  
A finger showed me the moon.  
The moon showed me the mind.



"HANSHAN AND SHIDE"  
KEISON - JAPAN (MID- TO LATE 16TH CENTURY)

## Very busy loaves of meat

In the infinite sea of the universe,  
There are billions of dragons and fishes –  
All are eating one another;  
Very busy loaves of meat!

Because appearances in the mind never stop,  
Illusion is formed like mist;  
But your true nature is like a shining moon –  
In the open sky, its light is clear  
And borderless.

## Rafts of sin

What is the most pitiable thing in the world?  
The rafts people build  
To reach hell.

They are paying no attention  
To the monk among the clouds  
And cliffs.

A tattered robe for life's road.

When autumn comes,  
He lets the leaves fall.  
When spring arrives,  
He lets the trees bloom.

Wandering along the Three Realms;  
Unburdened.

The moon, his lantern;  
The wind, his home.

Until the moon is seen...

I like simplicity;  
Among plants and caves  
In the mountain.

In the forest, one can wander aimlessly;  
White clouds will keep you company,  
In the Way that leads nowhere.

Only Emptiness  
Can climb here.

At night, alone with rocks;  
Until the moon is seen:  
Cold Mountain.

## The Diamond Sutra

The Buddha himself, “The Big B”, Siddhartha Gautama (also known, among many other names and titles, as *Shakyamuni*, the “sage from the Shakya clan”) had a disciple called Subhuti, who once asked him:

“If the sons and daughters of good families are to develop the highest, most accomplished level of enlightenment; if they want to attain Perfect Transcendental Wisdom, what should they do to appease their drifting minds and to help weaken their thoughts of desire?”

The Buddha answered:

“If the sons and daughters of good families are to develop the Perfect Transcendental Wisdom, attaining the highest, most accomplished level of enlightenment – a peaceful heart, that nurtures no thoughts of desire – all these sons and daughters should listen carefully, with their complete attention, to what I’m about to say:

“Every living being – those that are born from eggs, those that are born from wombs, those that emerge from moisture, those spontaneously created and all of them; whether they have or have not a form; whether they are conscious, unconscious, not conscious, or not unconscious... I will eventually guide all living beings to Nirvana – the final cycle of birth and death.

“At the same time, Subhuti, even after this unimaginable amount of beings have been freed, not a single being anywhere will have been freed from anything. Why? Because a disciple attached to illusory notions related to form and movement

– such as an ego, a personality, a self, other selves or a universal self – is not a true disciple at all.

“Besides, while practicing compassion and charity, a true disciple must have no attachments. In other words, they must practice their compassion and their charity regardless of appearances and forms, sounds, odors, taste and other qualities of any kind. Why? Because practicing compassion and charity without attachments is the way to reach Perfect Transcendental Wisdom; it is the way to become a living buddha.

“Tell me, Subhuti, is it possible to measure all the universe? The same goes for the merit of those practicing compassion and charity without attachment to appearances; it would be impossible to measure all of it.

“What are these ‘appearances’? Could anyone recognize the buddhas by their appearance? When we talk of appearances, we are not talking about reality, but illusions. Everything that has a form or an appearance is an illusion; it is not real. When you understand the meaning of all forms being unreal and illusory, you instantly understand how they really are.”

With the feeling of tasting a sweet nectar, Subhuti remarked:

“Even in a very distant future, master, do you believe people will still be able to listen to this teaching and to attain enlightenment’s true knowledge, experiencing the Root of All Reality awoken in their hearts?”

“Most certainly, Subhuti. There will always be those who are virtuous and wise. Practicing compassion and charity by themselves, they will

realize the truth of our words and have their hearts completely awakened. Upon meeting the words we said today, a profound trust will emerge in their hearts. This will happen because they will intuitively understand these words as an expression of Reality.

“However, these virtuous, wise people will have planted the seeds of a good heart and a wise mind for many lives in the past; they will have planted these seeds hundreds of thousands of times. When a person is thus ready, a pure and pervading confidence will grow in their hearts.

“Whether in the past, now or in the future, people who understand the meaning of charity and compassion with disregard for appearances will be always surrounded by auspicious signs. Why? Because by understanding the meaning of detached charity and compassion, all symbolic fantasies about the existence of oneself, other selves, or an universal self are abandoned. A person who attains this understanding will also have abandoned all subjective dualisms about the *non-existence* of oneself, other selves, or an universal self. Without the confluence of all these things, their hearts would continue to pursue such kind of differentiations.

“For this reason, whoever wants to experience Perfect Enlightenment must abandon not only their ideas about their own identity, other identities and an universal identity, but also their thoughts about the non-existence of such things.

“When a buddha resorts to this sort of preaching, using the same kind of linguistic ideas and concepts he condemns, while using them, people

should consider the unreality of concepts and ideas. When teaching about spiritual truths, a buddha will always use language in the same way a raft is used to cross a river. Once we've reached the other shore, there is no more use for the raft; one must abandon it before actually stepping on the other bank.

“Before attaining enlightenment, most people will need those who can explain these subjective ideas about spirituality; but these thoughts and symbolic drawings *about* spirituality must also be abandoned when *practicing* spirituality.

“Hence, it is only natural, Subhuti, that one should also discard ideas about the non-existence of such ghosts. Whoever becomes attached to the linguistic denial of the world of language will be actually affirming it. [The other side, or negative view of this statement is also hinted at by the Third Patriarch of Zen, in “Trust your own heart”: attached to the linguistic affirmation of the world of emptiness, one is actually negating it.]

“Would you say the Buddha has attained the highest, most realized and most awakened enlightened mind, Subhuti? Do you believe this is what I teach?”

“As I have understood your teaching, master, there is no separate, independent object to be called ‘the mind’, or classified as ‘the highest, most realized and most awakened enlightened mind’. There is also no separate, independent teaching the Buddha has mastered and shared with the world. Why? Because the teaching the Buddha has attained and later shared with the world by means of words cannot be considered a separate,

independent entity one might express by means of language and its dualisms. The nature of this teaching cannot be represented with ideas, nor can it be contained in thoughts. It neither is, nor isn't. This means the buddhas and their disciples were not enlightened by virtue of a teaching or method; but going through an inner mystery that is intimate, intuitive, spontaneous and related to their own fundamental nature."

The Most Honored One insisted:

"And if someone could fill the Three Thousand Worlds with the seven kinds of treasure and give it all away for charity, compassion and aiding the poor, Subhuti, this person would accumulate many merits and bring joy to many beings?"

"Of course, my dear master, Prince of the Awakened. Such a person would accumulate a lot of merit and bring joy to many beings; even if, in reality, no person constitutes a separate, independent being where any merit could accumulate. Why? Because this accumulated merit has the fundamental nature of a non-merit."

This pleased the Buddha, for he said:

"If any person could really understand at least a little part from this conversation we are having, and if this person could explain it to others, the merit accumulated by such a deed would be even greater than the one we ascribed to charity and compassion. Do you know why? Because all the buddhas and all their teachings; all the highest, most realized, most awakened enlightened minds, with all their merits arise from the wisdom mentioned in this sutra. And still, Subhuti, I have to take back all these words, as soon as they were

spoken; for in the Absolute, there are no buddhas; there is no teaching. Would a person abiding in the Absolute think 'I abide in the Absolute'?

"No, master. A true disciple, abiding in the Absolute, won't think of themselves as separate, independent entities liable to abide here, or there. Only those who have abandoned every distinction between themselves and the world – only those who perceive no separate, independent entities in any forms or appearances, be they sounds, tastes, images, odors, textures or ideas – can be said to abide in the Absolute."

"And how about that most honorable disciple, Subhuti, who has attained their release from Samsara, the Wheel of Life and Death, never again to be reborn in a mortal body; does a person like this have some special claim on receiving the honors and merits due to this attainment? Would this person celebrate saying 'I am the one who will never return!'"

"No, master. Reincarnation is nothing but a name. There is no 'going away from' and no 'arriving to' in the universe of being. Only those who understand this might be called true disciples. Not-returning is only a name; an idea. Nothing is returning. Nothing is not-returning."

"Would buddhas think to themselves: 'I have attained Perfect Enlightenment'?"

"No, master. In Emptiness, there is no separate, independent thing called Enlightenment to be attained. If buddhas were making statements like that to themselves, they would still be attached to the illusory existence of a self – a separate and independent identity – and for this rea-

son they would not be buddhas.”

Shakyamuni was a bad thief. Watch him sneaking to the back door now:

“You are a very special disciple, Subuthi. Your knowledge about the joys of enlightenment is vast and profound. I can see you are perfectly balanced and satisfied while living as a beggar, and that your freedom in relation to your passions is truly remarkable.”

But that disciple wasn’t about to be tricked out of his meal, for he answered:

“My dear master, if I thought about myself in this fashion, how could I ever escape the illusions of identity? As I see it, there is actually no Subhuti and, for this reason, a Subhuti could never be found anywhere. Pleasure is neither something of my knowledge, nor something unknown to me. I have no freedom from my passions, nor am I a slave to them.”

The Buddha was a talkative man:

“And what about my past lives; particularly the one when I sacrificed myself to the Dipankara Buddha, in my efforts to reach enlightenment – did I receive some special power, or attained some level of self-control that qualified me to become a buddha?”

“No, my honored master. When you met the Dipankara Buddha in your past life, there was no power received and no self-control attained.”

“If people calling themselves buddhas promise to create a paradise, Subhuti, they would be all lying. Why? Because a paradise cannot be created, nor can it be undone.

“All disciples must nurture a heart that is free

from forms, sounds, odors, tastes, tactile feelings and mental representations; they must nurture a heart that is not dependent on anything. My dear Subhuti, the hearts of all disciples must be cleansed of anything related to seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. Their hearts must be natural and spontaneous, with no obstructions that are caused by prejudiced notions arising from the senses.

“But what are these prejudiced notions that arise from the senses? People who are troubled by these words should think of a human whose body is as big as Mount Sumeru. Led by the illusion of their senses, wouldn’t such a person develop an intimate feeling of possessing a gigantic personal existence?”

Answered Subhuti:

“Most certainly, master, this person would be pushed towards the illusion of a gigantic personal existence. However, the Buddha has thought us that appearances, odors, tastes, sounds, tactile feelings and names are all illusions. In reality, there is no division between big and small. Why? Because there are no separate and independent entities. It doesn’t matter how much space a body will occupy; it is still occupying a space. In Emptiness – which cannot be measured, tasted, seen, heard, touched or represented by the dualism of language – big and small are all the same; they are inseparable.”

Pleased with this answer, the Gautama Buddha remarked:

“Even if we imagine a new Ganges for each grain of sand in the actual Ganges, and someone

who would fill all the Three Thousand Worlds with the seven kinds of treasure, as many times as there are grains of sand in all of those countless imaginary Ganges, giving all these riches for works of charity and compassion, this would not even compare to the merit and the distribution of joy produced by explaining a single part from this sutra to others.

“Wherever in the world any person explains a single part from this sutra to another, that ground will become sacred and worthy of being revered by any king or emperor. Even more sacred will become any place where a person studies this sutra and practices it. Wherever this sutra is honored and considered, appears an altar containing the presence of all the buddhas and all their honorable disciples... Anyway, there is no idea or mental representation that could express the real importance of the teachings we expose in this sutra.”

Subhuti agreed:

“And how should we name this sutra?”

Shakyamuni said:

“This sutra should be called The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion. This sutra is compact and sharp, like a diamond, and it can cut through relative perceptions and reach the Other Shore of Enlightenment... Can you put a number to the whirlwinds of dust in this world, Subhuti?”

“There are countless whirlwinds of dust in this world, master.”

“But when I mention whirlwinds of dust as I speak, Subhuti, it doesn’t mean that people should look for the truth in the ideas – whether casual, or meticulous – about whirlwinds of dust. I am only

using these words as a figure of speech. They are not real, but illusions. The same goes for words like ‘universe’ – this sort of concept, whether casual or meticulous, can establish no reality. These are illusory drawings in the mind, with the same fundamental nature of the sights, sounds, tastes, tactile feelings and fragrances in human consciousness. I’m just using the words as words. Can buddhas be recognized by their appearance, my dear friend?”

“No, master. A buddha cannot be recognized by appearance. Why? Because the Buddha has taught us that appearances are not real, but mere images.”

At this point, the Buddha was very pleased. Not completely pleased, but very pleased. Right now, we are almost half way there – until he is completely satisfied with this brilliant repetition of the same thing. He says:

“If anybody simply listens to this conversation we’re having, Subhuti, their merit would be far greater than even the one ascribed to a person who sacrificed their own lives for charity, as many times as there are grains of sand in the Three Thousand Worlds.”

Profoundly touched and moved to tears by this approval, Subhuti makes his own speech:

“What a precious gift, the priceless jewel of enlightenment! Since having awakened the eyes of compassion, revealed by the wisdom of the Buddha, I recognize no other teaching that is vaster, or more beautiful. Great Perfectly Self-enlightened One, King of Boundless Awakening, if people are listening to your teachings while nurturing a

bright feeling of trust inside their hearts, it will be possible for them to attain a great experience concerning the truth. By practicing this experience, one attains the most sophisticated kind of virtue. This understanding of truth is no actual understanding; but what the Buddha calls an understanding of truth. Those who attach themselves to relative concepts about their own identity, the identity of others or some universal identity are entangling themselves to what is non-existent. Buddhas have become buddhas by discarding the relative concepts about forms and corresponding imaginary entities; buddhas can become buddhas only by transcending the illusory perceptions and reaching the source of all forms.”

Shakyamuni approved his disciple once more:

“So it is, Subhuti. Blessed are those who can listen to this sutra without trembling, or shaking. Why? Because this sutra concerns the highest perfection – that very one that is no perfection at all and, because of this, has been pointed at by all the countless buddhas as being the highest form of perfection in existence.

“The experience of enlightenment relates to attaining the perfect patience – which of course has no relation to the idea of perfection, nor to the concept of attainment; it has no attachments to symbolic statues representing patience. The real practice of perfect patience is to practice perfect patience and nothing else.

“Thousands of lives prior to this one, when the prince of Kalinga mutilated my limbs and face, my flesh and my bones, at that moment of torture I experienced no personal identity, no self and no

separate, independent entity. While going through those horrors, I neither felt them; nor did I not-feel them. Why? Because if I held to the illusory notion of a self, back then, I would also be filled by anger. If I had experienced my life by means of some linguistic interpretation, at that time, led by their illusory differentiations I would have also abandoned myself to hatred.

“For five hundred reincarnations, I dedicated my live to the practice of patience; like a saint who was summoned to suffer in humbleness. Even in those days, my heart was already purged of any relative concepts about identity, self and separate entities.

“Reaching supreme enlightenment, Subhuti, demands the cleansing of all differentiations. A true disciple’s heart is not dependent on perceptions born out of isolated sounds, tastes, odors, feelings, shapes or ideas. The good sons and daughters who want to experience enlightenment should not attach themselves to thoughts about thinking, nor to thoughts about non-thinking. Their hearts should be free and spontaneous; it should never get stuck to any illusory object as perceived by the senses. If one’s heart is following the objects of the senses, it is following illusions; immaterial projections, apart from the truth. This is the reason for practicing charity with no regard for appearances. When you practice charity for the wellbeing of all living things, appearances lose their significance and you can detach yourself from them.

“If a person enters a dark place and can no longer see, this person is like the one who

practices charity while concerned with appearances. But if a person is at an open field when the sun starts to rise and she can see everything around her, this person is like the one who practices charity with no regard for appearances.

“The idea of a being is not a being; in the same way, all these things I have been talking about are not-things. All things are exactly as I describe them, and the things I have been taking about are all true, with no falsehood. Furthermore, Subhuti, when enlightenment is realized, practiced and normalized, nothing is true or false anymore. As I have declared before, matter is not material. I also declare now that all living beings are actually not-living-beings.

“If anybody is satisfied by teachings inferior to these, Subhuti, this person is still attached to the idea of a self; a separate, independent entity. Such a person won’t be able to listen, to receive, to practice or to explain this sutra to anyone.

“When we talk in so much detail about the subject of enlightenment, some people might be suspicious, or skeptical – some might even feel disoriented and have their minds confused. One must understand Subhuti, that the meaning of this sutra is beyond language.”

Subhuti bowed to his master, grateful for his teachings, and pushed again the merry-go-round:

“If you would allow me another question, master: what could the sons and daughters of good families do to develop the highest, most awakened mind? If they are to experience the Unparalleled Perfect Transcendental Wisdom, what would they have to do in order to appease their drifting minds

and become masters of their own thinking?”

Shakyamuni replied:

“If sons and daughters from good families want to attain the highest, most awakened mind, experiencing Perfect Transcendental Wisdom, they should start by maintaining a determination such as this: ‘I will transport all living beings to the Other Shore of Enlightenment; even as I know that, after doing so, not a single living being will have been saved.’

“Why? Because a disciple attached to the idea of ‘independent entities and beings to save’ should never be called a true disciple. There is not even an independent object to be called The Highest, Most Awakened Mind. Again, anybody who doesn’t understand the situation should think of a giant person. When I speak of a giant person, Subhuti, how would *you* interpret it?”

The disciple answered:

“When the master speaks of a ‘giant person’, I understand it as an illustration – a drawing made of ideas, with no intention of representing real things. The meaning carried by these words is merely imaginary. When the Buddha speaks of a giant person, he is just using the words as words.”

The Buddha continued:

“The same interpretation also applies to that determination of saving all living beings. Attached to the ideas about living beings – concerned about their number – one is not worthy of being called a true disciple. In Emptiness, there is not even an object to be called a disciple. In Emptiness, this concept is nothing but an imagination. Besides, there are also no beings who need to be saved by

nobody.

“A true disciple will understand how reality never changes; it is always as it is, independent from any concepts about reality, identity, or any other symbolic abstraction. If a disciple should say: ‘I will create a serene garden of Buddha,’ this ain’t no true disciple. Why? Because the ‘serene garden of a buddha’ about which the Buddha speaks is different from the serene garden of a Buddha that can be talked about. That serene garden of a buddha is not the serene garden of a buddha; not being the serene garden of a buddha is what makes it worthy of being called the serene garden of a buddha.

“When I talk about the grains of sand in the Ganges, Subhuti, am I talking about real grains of sand?”

“No, master. You are merely talking about the ideas created in the human mind, upon meeting the words ‘grains of sand’.”

“So it is, Subhuti. Some say I have the eyes of a human, the eyes of enlightenment, the eyes of transcendental wisdom, the eyes of spiritual intuition and also the eyes of compassion for all the sentient beings. However, these sentient beings are not living beings. They are not non-living beings; we just refer to them as living beings.

“I know the heart of every living being, in every world there ever was. Different philosophies, different trends of thought and different theories are not the mind, even if sometimes we call them ‘mind’. In reality, however, one cannot grab the mind of the past, reach the mind of the future, nor retain a mind of the present.

“Also, when we speak of spiritual merit and blessings, this is only a figure of speech, with no substance. Nothing but words. Drawings made of thoughts. Trusting in those is like searching the Buddha by appearances. Finally, whoever declares that the Buddha has spoken spiritual truths will be spreading dirt over my name, for spiritual truths cannot be spoken. This is why we talk about ‘being sincere’.”

Subhuti wanted more:

“Master, when you attained what we now call ‘supreme enlightenment’, did it really feel like no attainment at all?”

“So it is, Subhuti. When I attained supreme enlightenment, there were no concepts in my heart. Even the words ‘supreme enlightenment’ are nothing but words, and I use them as nothing but words. What I have attained with supreme enlightenment is that which everybody already has. It is simply a state of non-differentiation that should not be taken as superior, or inferior.

“Supreme enlightenment means a manner of experience that is independent from ideas about myself, other beings, living beings, or universal beings. Practicing detached charity, for example, one can become indifferent to distinctions between oneself and others. We practice it by offering food and material comforts to those who are in need, but also kindness and sympathy.

“It should be made clear that my words are not suggesting some ideal concept of charity to be sought after. The kindness we can talk about is nothing but an idea about kindness; after all, ‘kindness’ is only a word. Real kindness doesn’t

think about kindness; doesn't try to appear as kindness. It is naturally spontaneous, aloof and detached from all appearances. Those who realize the unity of all things will also understand how merit is not a private property, or something to possess, but a common treasure of all beings.

"The idea of saving all sentient beings, by the way, is not something the Buddha preaches. If disciples believe themselves capable of freeing other beings; if they believe in other beings to be freed, this would imply an entanglement to the ideas of identity, self, or separate entities. Having said that, it must also be said that this 'identity' mentioned by the Buddha has no fundamental identity at all, in the sense a normal person would imagine 'identities' to exist. The Buddha doesn't believe in the existence of a normal person, and this is the reason he can speak about a normal person. Could people recognize the Buddha by his 32 signs, Subhuti?"

"Yes, master. It is possible to recognize the Buddha by his 32 physical marks."

"But if that was the truth, Subhuti, also the Cakravartin King would be considered a Buddha, for possessing the 32 signs."

Realizing his mistake, the disciple said:

"You are right, master. I realize now that the Buddha cannot be recognized by his 32 signs."

"This is the truth, Subhuti. If a person stares at a figure or picture of the Buddha, believing this is knowing the Buddha and paying reverence to the Buddha, this person would be lost; ignorant of the real Buddha. Even so, if anybody thinks the Buddha doesn't need the 32 signs to be recognized,

this person is also lost, and so are those believing the Buddha is coming or going, lying or sitting. Why? Because the Buddha comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. This name Buddha is nothing but the expression of an idea; a figure of speech.

“For example: imagine a person who could take all Three Thousand Worlds and grind them into a very fine powder; finally to blow this powder all over space. Would you consider each grain in this powder to have an individual identity?”

“By the conventional logic of human language, master, taking this powder for something real, its grains should be considered to have some sort of an identity; but when these words are used as merely words, it has no existence. These words are only an abstract illustration. Thinking about them in any other way would imply the belief that matter constitute separate, independent entities, which is not real. Besides, when the Buddha speaks of the ‘Three Thousand Worlds’, he could only do it as an abstract conceptualization. Why? Because if the Three Thousand Worlds do exist, their only reality would be found in their cosmic union. If this union assumes the appearance of so many galaxies, or the form of a very fine powder, what is the difference? A buddha can only really talk about the world as an indivisible whole.”

Finally satisfied enough to close this sutra with one last speech, Shakyamuni said:

“Even if ordinary people have always pursued reality in abstract ideas about matter, galaxies and other ghosts of representation interpreted as separate entities, these concepts in themselves are fundamentally unreal. They are illusions in a

mortal mind, and even when these concepts are imagining pictures and theories about the cosmic indivisibility of reality, the actual reality they seek to represent and understand is unspeakable and unknowable.

“If a person listening to this sutra believes the Buddha is constantly talking about his own being, other beings, living beings or an universal being, this person cannot be called a disciple, for their grasp of my teaching is mistaken. Why? Because while speaking about these things, I’m not referring to them as ‘actual existences’, but just using the words like symbols; like ghosts acting in a dream. Words can only be used like this. Thoughts, concepts, half-truths and spiritual truths are just as unreal as matter and movement.

“To practice my teachings, one must realize, perceive, experience, understand and see that any spiritual truth is a non-being. Thus, before we can experience complete enlightenment, our hearts must be cleansed of any such ghosts.

“No amount of treasures, no amount of lives sacrificed to charity could ever bring anybody a greater merit, or higher blessings than the ones ascribed to those – be they men or women, old or young, rich or poor – who seek enlightenment by studying, understanding, practicing and explaining this sutra to others. Why? Because it would be impossible to study, understand, practice and explain this sutra to anybody, while still entangled to conceptions about forms, movement, identity, or spiritual truths. Studying, understanding, practicing and explaining this sutra is only

possible after we are free and cleansed of all obsessions regarding appearances.

“At last, this is the proper approach a disciple should take, while facing our existence in this world:

“Like a tiny dewdrop found by morning in the garden and already gone by the afternoon;

“Like a bubble floating over the current in the Ganges;

“Like lightening coming out of a summer cloud, that also disappears in an instant;

“Like the trembling flame inside a lantern;

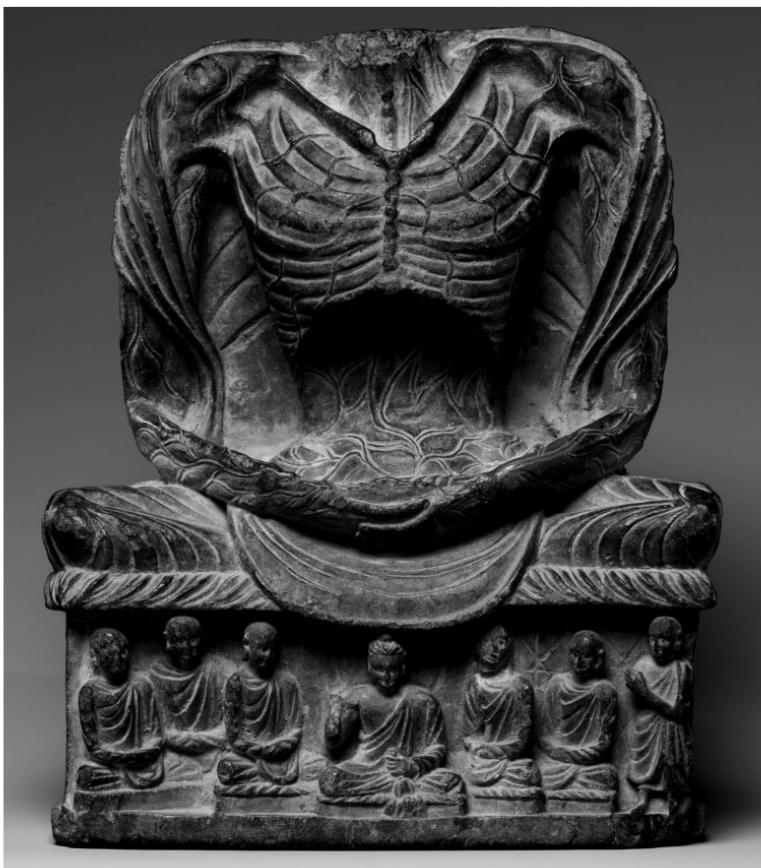
“Like an illusion, an apparition, or a dream.

“This is how a true disciple will face their own existence in this world.

“When one experiences the world in this way, heaven and earth are empty; one’s heart becomes as large as infinity and finds no obstruction.

“Freed from obstructions, one has no fear. For this reason, the Buddha fears no living nor dead person; no strange apparitions and no creatures like tigers and lions.

“If our lives are like dewdrops – like bubbles, or like lightening – where are obstructions to be found? There are no obstructions. Everything is the same. You bring a tiger here, and I will sit in meditation by its side.”



“FASTING BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI”  
UNKNOWN AUTHOR – PAKISTAN (3RD–5TH CENTURY)

## Without blinking an eye

During a civil war, after witnessing repeated horrors, the people of a certain village in China fled from their homes as soon as they learned that the imperial troops were approaching.

The only exception was an old monk, living alone in a humble Buddhist shrine and caring for the place, who kept his routine unchanged.

Hearing of such presumption, the general of the troops commanded his soldiers to fetch him this so called “saint”.

When the soldiers returned, the old man was tied up and quite beaten. Regardless, he betrayed no anger or fear, but rather an almost indifferent attitude.

This incensed the general, who was expecting crying and begging. On top of that, talking to the prisoner, he was addressed by this old man as if they were equals, with complete disregard for the proper language commonly used while addressing a superior. This made the general so angry, he drew his sword and rushed towards the master, shouting:

“Can’t you understand when the person in front of you is ready to kill you, without even blinking an eye?”

The master, unfazed, replied:

“Yes, I can. And how about you? Can’t you understand when the person in front of you is ready to die, without even blinking an eye?”

Realizing the monk really had no fear, the general put his sword back in its scabbard and, later, became a student of Zen.

## Tokimune and the cowardice

Hojo Tokimune ruled Japan in a very delicate period of its history and became a national hero by fending off the Mongol invasion.

Devoted students of Zen Buddhism, Tokimune and his father are also famous for introducing and popularizing the Way among the samurai.

At some stage of his training, very worried about the procedures of war, Tokimune had the following conversation with his master, Bukko:

“From what I understand, master, cowardice is the greatest enemy in a samurai’s life. How can I defeat this enemy?”

Bukko said:

“Cut off the source of cowardice.”

Tokimune was not a stranger to investigation:

“And what is the source of cowardice?”

Bukko was a snitch, for he said:

“It is Tokimune.”

Tokimune, the ruler, was already a general; experienced and hardened by the dealings of war against the respected and feared Mongol army. Naturally, the master’s suggestion that the source of cowardice was Tokimune himself made the samurai somewhat hurt in his pride. He protested:

“From all the things, cowardice is the one I hate most! How could I myself be the source of cowardice?”

The master warned him:

“Throw away this beloved Tokimune of yours and we can talk again after that.”

“But how could it be done?”

“Cut off all your thoughts.”

“But thoughts come spontaneously to me. How can I cut them off from my consciousness?”

The master recommended:

“Sit down with your legs crossed in meditation, and search for the source of these thoughts that you imagine as possessions of Tokimune.”

Though the warrior was an earnest student of the Way, he was also the ruler of a threatened land; burdened by his responsibilities:

“I have so many practical matters to attend, it becomes difficult finding spare time to sit down and meditate.”

The master said:

“If you use these practical matters from your daily life as opportunity for inner reflections, one day you will find out who exactly is this beloved Tokimune of yours.”

## Anger management

A samurai called on a famous Zen master and asked:

“I have an uncontrollable temper, master. I give myself to anger, and later regret it. Can you help me with this?”

The master looked very surprised:

“This is very strange! Could you please show me this anger now?”

The soldier replied:

“Right now, I can’t.”

“And why not?”

“This anger is something that will suddenly take me every now and then.”

The master said:

“If that is so, this anger is not a part of your true nature, or you’d have no problem showing it at any time. In other words, why should you get so worried about something that is not yours?”

After having this conversation, whenever the samurai was feeling angry, he would think of the master’s words and they would help him to calm down. With time, he developed a peaceful temper.

## The giant hound

Who is the one who could untie  
The bell dangling from the neck  
Of the giant hound?

Before answering,  
You should ask:

Who was the one  
Who tied it up there,  
To begin with?

## A samurai meets heaven and hell

A samurai asked master Hakuin:

“Do heaven and hell really exist?”

The master disdainfully said:

“Who do you think you are, to come here and ask me these silly questions?”

The samurai was confused, but honest:

“I’m a soldier at the service of the emperor.”

Hakuin laughed:

“Really? Has the emperor such a deplorable army, that even *you* could be a soldier? How could you serve the emperor? Your demeanor is that of a beggar.”

The samurai, naturally offended, placed a hand over the hilt of his sword, but controlled himself. The master added:

“This toy-sword of yours is probably too rusty and dull to cut off my head.”

Furious, the soldier unsheathed his blade and rushed towards the master, who calmly explained:

“Here, one crossed the gates of hell.”

As if slammed by a brick wall, the samurai immediately halted; understanding the practical answer of the master to his question.

The samurai slowly returned his blade to its scabbard and bowed down, with his head touching the ground, showing great reverence. The master announced:

“Here, one crossed the gates of heaven.”

## Swords everywhere, constantly

A young lad braved mountains and forests, dreaming of training the art of swordplay with his idol – a legendary retired swordsman, said to be living as a recluse somewhere.

When the old man was finally discovered, practicing zazen by a solitary hut, the student was accepted without any fuss. From then on, he would clean the house, sweep the yard, bring the water, gather kindling etc.

A couple of months wasted away like this and the student was disappointed. Doing various chores in silence, respectfully waiting, he received no instruction whatsoever related to swordplay.

Resolved, he approached the old man and told him that he wanted to learn the art of the sword, and not the art of the servant.

The master nodded his head in agreement.

As of the next day, the life of this student would become hell.

The peaceful doings of his chores were over. It didn't matter if he was chopping wood, boiling the water to cook rice, or gathering herbs – like a ghost, the master would strike out of nowhere with his bamboo stick. Either sweeping the floor, or picking up fruit, fear of the master's strike was ever present. Regardless, it would always come when it was least expected; as if falling from the sky, or materializing directly from nothing.

A few years passed, before the student was able to spontaneously avoid any strike – but even this attainment did not impress the master.

One day, the disciple noticed the old man

scooching over a large pan, very interested in the progress of a vegetable soup. The bamboo stick used by the master to beat on him was left in a corner close by... This particular arrangement of circumstances inspired a brilliant, mischievous idea in the student's mind.

He silently picked up the bamboo stick and, very furtively, struck at the master's head. The old man, however, remained perfectly calm, using the lid of the pan, in his hand, to block the blow. He didn't even look back, while doing it.

In this moment of failure and learning, the disciple instantly understood the principles of the art.

## Not-thinking

When Yakusan was sitting with his legs crossed, a monk who had never seen zazen asked him:

“What are you thinking, as you sit like this?”

Yakusan replied:

“I’m thinking what is beyond thinking.”

The monk was confused:

“And how can you think of that which is beyond thinking?”

Yakusan was a dirty snitch and gave it all away:

“By not-thinking.”

It is over way before it ends...

A monk asked Wei-kuan:

“Where is the Way?”

The master said:

“Right in front of us.”

The monk charged:

“Then why can’t I see it?”

“Because of your selfishness, you cannot see it.”

“I’m so selfish, I can’t see it; but *Your Holiness* can see it?”

The master (clearly a very charitable man) said:

“As long as ‘me’ and ‘you’ are involved in this, the situation gets complicated and nobody can see it.”

This monk, on the other hand, was a lot of work – maybe he should have hired a nanny, but instead, he insisted with the Zen master:

“So, when there is neither ‘me’ nor ‘you’, the Way can be finally seen?”

Wei-kuan (so generous), gave this monk(ey) some banana candy to chew on:

“When there is neither ‘me’ nor ‘you’, who is there to see it?”

## Transcending both object and subject

A monk asked master Chih, from Yun-chu:

“When the Buddha said one must look into their own nature to become a buddha, what did he mean?”

The master said:

“From the very beginning, our nature is pure and empty; serene and unmovable. It precedes the differentiated world of forms, inhabited by entities such as birth and death, virtue and sin, big and small, delivering and receiving... When our nature is seen, the body abides in a state of as-it-isness. When you experience this directly, you are looking into your own nature. Your own nature is the Buddha and the Buddha is your own nature. This is what is meant by looking into your own nature and becoming a buddha.”

The monk was not satisfied:

“But if our nature precedes the differentiated world of birth and death, virtue and sin and so on, where exactly does this ‘seeing’ happen?”

The master said:

“There is a seeing, but no determinate sight or object being seen.”

“If there is not a determinate sight or object being seen, how can we speak of a seeing?”

“This seeing corresponds to a different kind of seeing.”

“In this form of seeing, who is the observer?”

The master said:

“There is no observer.”

## Wuzhun riding a mule

For a long period in China, Buddhism was showered in privilege – allowing temples to boast fabulous luxury, and to accumulate large amounts of precious metals in statues and relics. Also the nobles and merchants would often make fabulous donations of treasure and land to monasteries, as the buying and selling of “salvation” is an ancient business.

An entire class of Buddhist monks enjoyed a lavish lifestyle among the nobles in court. Even beyond their riches and material comforts, these powerful priests were also shown great reverence and respect.

When a systematic persecution of Buddhists and their treasures took place, under the emperor Wuzong, their temples at the capital and largest cities were razed to the ground; their riches were stolen and the monks were murdered. When this persecution was over, the Chan sect emerged as the predominant school of Chinese Buddhism.

But why?

Chan (the Japanese pronounce it “Zen”) also witnessed countless tragedies in this period, but the school was not as persecuted as the others – mainly, because their temples were mostly very poor and geographically isolated; because the Zen monks usually led a very simple and independent life, usually begging, or eating the product of their own extensive farming.

Also the particular features of Zen ideology probably helped a lot. The following episode well

illustrates this aversion to riches and sanctimony, disdainful of earthly rewards.

The anecdote was registered as a side-note to a painting from Wuzhun – a Chinese Zen master who, like so many others, was a great artist; mostly admired as a calligrapher, a poet and a painter – but also due to his profound wisdom and eccentric behavior.

On a certain occasion, master Wuzhun was summoned to the imperial palace, where, to his surprise, the poet was handsomely rewarded by the emperor Lizong.

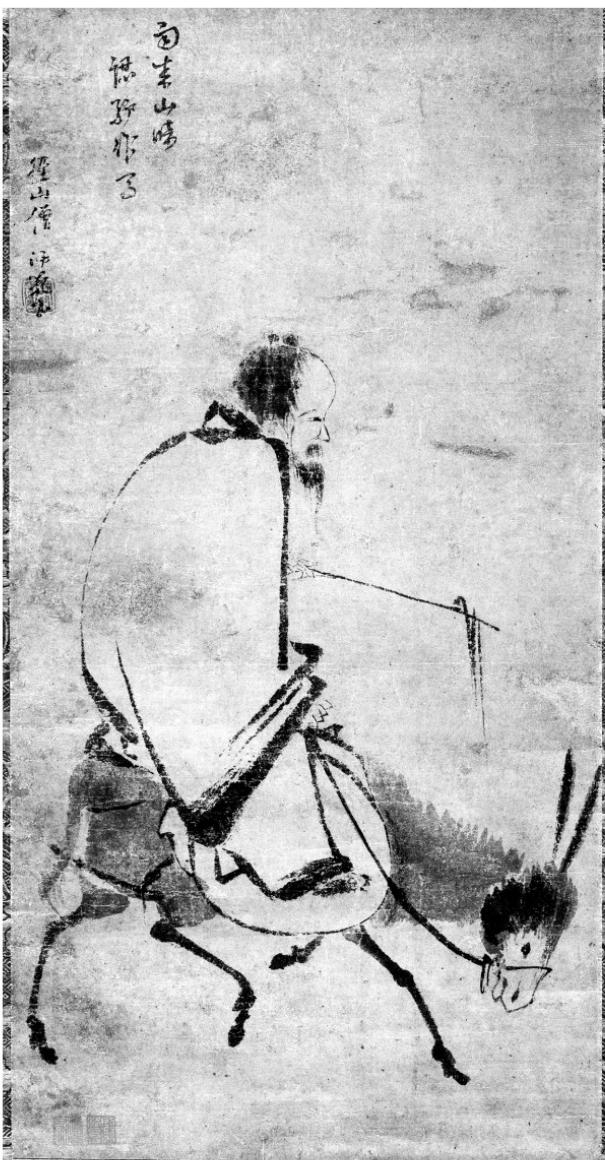
Back to his solitary retreat, Wuzhun painted the following picture. Experts at the Met Museum had this to say about it:

*Painted in a few swift brushstrokes and deftly applied ink washes, Chan Master Riding a Mule exemplifies the freely expressive manner of Chan Buddhist painting; which relies less on descriptive detail than on the capturing of spiritual concentration within the artist, to achieve a vivid depiction.*

The screen features the image of a monk with a prominent forehead, a mustache and a wispy beard (not unlike those of Wuzhun himself) riding on a mule.

In beautiful and fluid calligraphy, he also wrote the following inscription:

*When rain darkens the mountain,  
People mistake a mule for a horse.*



"CHAN MASTER RIDING A MULE"  
(南宋 佚名 騎驢圖 軸)  
WUZHUN SHIFAN – CHINA (1238)

## Flowers in the eyes of someone

The Buddha said:

Kings and emperors, to me, are like some grains of sand. Treasures of gold and precious gems are bricks and pebbles. I see the richest silk as the poorest fabric and the so many galaxies in the sky as tiny seeds in a fig. The largest lake in India is nothing but a drop of water over my feet. I see the teachings of the sages in this world as magicians' tricks. I think of the highest ideas and most sophisticated theories about salvation as golden cloths in a dream. Judgments on right and wrong appear to me as the spiraling dance of a single dragon. The shifting of beliefs is like the shifting of the seasons.

The sacred practice of enlightenment is like flowers blooming in someone's eyes.

Meditation is like a mountain.

Heaven is an awakening dream.

## Mazu Daoyi, or Ma-tsü Tao-yi, or...

Baso is said to be the first master using his staff as a “Dharma tool” for beating students into enlightenment.

His appearance was considered strange: it is said he would run like a cow and stare like a tiger. It is also said (and here I’d like to note how this information has been kept and repeated for over a thousand years) that he could cover his nose with his tongue. (My series has information!)

When Baso was young, the Sixth Patriarch told him:

“Wherever you go, herds of wild horses will appear and trample the people into the Great Death.”

Baso guided 139 of his disciples to the Other Shore – everyone of them would become a noted spiritual master in a different part of the world; tirelessly preaching the Way.

On a certain occasion, a monk asked him:

“What is the meaning of Buddhism?”

Baso asked him:

“What is the meaning of right now?”

## Answering in silence

A monk asked Yakusan:

“I’ve been groping for a meaning to my own life, master. Could you please explain the meaning of Buddhism and enlighten me?”

Yakusan kept silent. This was his answer. If this monk was prepared, he would be able to understand it. However, it was clear to Yakusan that this monk wasn’t ready, for he added:

“I could easily tell you a couple of words about the matter before us, but the point is understanding the meaning of things immediately, with no deliberation. When this is actualized, we can approach the truth. However, you are tarrying. You are trying to reason about the subject and I’d be at fault saying anything. Thus, it is better that I keep my mouth shut, and this will save us both a lot of trouble.”

## Drawing on the ground

A monk picked up a stick and drew four lines of different sizes on the ground, before addressing Baso:

“One can’t really say that one is bigger, or smaller than the other. Putting aside words and measurements about bigger and smaller, how would you describe it?”

Baso took the stick from the monk and drew a single line on the floor. He said:

“Without words or measurements about bigger and smaller, I’ve answered you.”

## I have never conformed myself to anything

A monk asked Baso:

“How can we conform ourselves to the Way?”

Baso replied:

“I have never conformed myself to the Way.”

The monk insisted:

“What is the fundamental teaching of Zen?”

Baso beat him with his staff and explained:

“If I didn’t beat you now, I’d become a laughingstock for the whole world.”

## Seven of the seven

A monk asked Joshu:

“What is the essence of all the essences?”

Joshu replied:

“Something stupid you don’t need. This ‘essence of the essences’ some people have turned into a fashion nowadays is like the ‘seven of the seven’, or the ‘eight of the eight’.”

Even if it is so, some can see it and some can't

A tall monk, who appeared to be at his seventies, asked Joshu:

“What is the essence of all the essences?”

Joshu replied:

“If such a thing really existed, it would be a tall monk, appearing to be at his seventies.”

Another one?

A monk asked Joshu:

“What is the essence of all the essences?”

Joshu asked:

“For how long have you been essencing yourself up like that?”

This monk proudly said:

“Since I was young, I have been earnestly concerned about the essence.”

Joshu remarked:

“This stupid monk was very lucky to meet me here today! He was about to essence himself out!”

## Escaping a dilemma

A Zen master was crossing the woods with a group of students, when he picked up a stick of bamboo from the ground and questioned Ekido about it:

“What is this?”

Naturally, this was no ordinary question – it was a test. Most certainly, if Ekido had answered something like “a bamboo stick”, the master would have used it to strike him. The student hesitated, so the master hit him with the stick.

The master repeated the question, now to Tanzan:

“What is this?”

This monk was not afraid of the test, for he said:

“Could you let me have a closer look at it?”

The master promptly threw the bamboo stick to Tanzan, who unhesitantly used it to strike the master.



"TWO HORSES BENEATH THE MOON"  
UTAGAWA HIROSHIGE - JAPAN (CA. 1830)

## What if Mr. Lu points at the moon?

A scholar visited Mount Sokei – home to Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen (previously known as Lu, the wandering beggar) – carrying a heavy pile of scriptures and an even thicker bundle of doubts he meant to solve with the master.

Huineng told him:

“I am sorry, but I cannot read these scrolls. Please, you read them out loud to me and I will explain them to you.”

The intellectual was dumbstruck upon discovering that the greatest living authority on Zen Buddhism was an illiterate person or, rather, an uneducated one.

The reader should consider here that Chinese has a different writing system, with no resort to an alphabet in order to produce words. Huineng would certainly know many simple characters, commonly used in daily life (the numbers 1 to 3, for example, are 一, 二 and 三); however, he was in no condition to face all the complicated, scholarly characters constituting the profound, refined and cryptic philosophy spread over those scrolls.

From the scholar's point of view, on the other hand, “understanding” was limited to erudition and he asked:

“How could you explain anything from these scriptures to me, if you can't even read them?”

The master replied:

“Words and reality are very different. Words are like a finger...”

Here, Huineng pointed at the moon.

“We can point at the moon, using a finger, but

the finger is not the moon. Before discovering the moon, one has to abandon the finger. The words from those Buddhist scriptures are like fingers pointing at the unspeakable reality. Those words can only show you the fingers. The moon is beyond the fingers.”

## The autumn moon

The truth is that the moon  
Is beautiful in all seasons;  
But specially in autumn.

When the time of harvest arrives,  
Mountains look intimidating.  
Streams are running cold and clear.

A round mirror floats  
In the infinite sky.  
The land: a single silver blade,  
Flooded and unified under its light.

But putting aside both light and object,  
What is that, exactly?

The infinite sky – so high!  
The wind on my face – so cold!  
I grab my precious staff  
And walk the belly of the mountain.  
Not a particle of dust anywhere.  
Every direction is lonely and serene.

Wandering aimlessly,  
As my eyes are drinking brightness  
Pouring down from the moon.  
Tonight, how many others are gazing at her?  
How many wanderers are bathed now  
By the same moonlight?

Every autumn, watching the moon.  
Humans will admire it for eternity.

Shakyamuni preaching at the Vulture Peak...  
The Sixth Patriarch pointing at the moon...  
These must have happened in nights like this.

I chant for the moon, throughout the night;  
As the streams get quieter  
And a white dew falls.

Whose well reflected it for longer?  
Which traveler absorbed more moonlight?  
Over whose house has it shone the most?

Look!  
One can see it clearly:  
Baso and his disciples –  
As the master recognized  
Nansen alone  
Was no longer a disciple.

Listen!  
One can hear it clearly:  
The famous laughter from Yakusan –  
Vibrating through the villages,  
All the way from the solitary peak.

These stories from ancient times  
Inspired many a traveler  
To watch the waxing and waning of the moon  
With an empty mind.

Full of respect for the ancient sages,  
I also stare at the moon;  
My robe, suddenly heavy with dew.

## A challenge under the moonlight

Baso and his disciples Chizo, Hyakujo and Nansen were watching the moon together, when the master made the following challenge:

“This moment, what is it?”

Chizo said:

“Perfect root.”

Hyakujo said:

“Perfect practice.”

Nansen waved the sleeves from his tunic [this represents a cliché in ancient Chinese literature for showing one’s displeasure, like saying “eww”] and walked away in silence.

Baso exclaimed:

“A new sutra enters the Buddhist cannon.”

## Laughing at the moon

According to legend, Yakusan had just reached a mountain peak, when clouds dispersed and the moon was revealed (we may assume that it was previously hidden, as he repeatedly searched for it during the climb). This caused the monk to explode in a tremendous laughter.

The sound of this laughter was so loud, people from villages miles away were said to hear it well.

A famous poet from the period made reference to Yakusan's laughter in these verses:

Directly under the sky;  
A solitary peak.

The clouds dispersed:  
The moon!

Laughter emerged  
From the whole heart.

## Natural treasure

Over the peak  
On Cold Mountain

A bright lonely pearl  
Enlightens an infinite sky;  
Cloudless.

Cherish this natural treasure:  
Stealthily disguised  
Under six veils;  
Deeply buried  
Beneath the skin.

## Not-two

Enlightenment  
Is not apart from you.

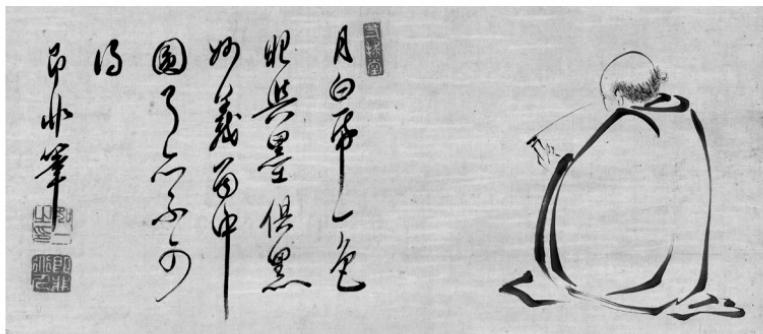
It is like the moon  
Reflected over undisturbed waters:  
You cannot push enlightenment away,  
Like the water cannot push the moon away  
And the moon doesn't push the water.

Still:  
At water level,  
The height of the moon.

## Reading a sutra by moonlight

The moon and the paper  
Share a single color.  
Both the pupil of the eye  
And the ink are black.

The marvelous teaching  
Embedded in the circle  
Is beyond understanding.



"READING A SUTRA BY MOONLIGHT"  
(即非如一筆 墨蹟)  
SOKUHI NYOITSU - JAPAN (17TH CENTURY)

## Like an elephant in the forest

Have you ever met enlightened ones?  
They are wise and honest friends.  
They can overcome confusion.  
You can go with them!  
Enjoy an awakened life!

In case you cannot find them,  
Simply wander alone –  
Like a king who gave up on his throne;  
Like an elephant in the forest.

It is better to be alone;  
A fool is no friend, but trouble.  
Wander alone and join no evil;  
Satisfied, like an elephant in the forest.

When it's time for friends,  
Friends are pleasant.

When it's time for joy,  
Enjoyment is pleasant.

Being satisfied with things as they are  
Is pleasant.

When a life is over,  
Death is pleasant.

## Seven days of silence

Long before Zen Buddhism became popular in Japan, monks already practiced many forms of meditation.

Four monks in this situation were very close friends and used to practice together. On a certain occasion, they made the commitment of spending seven days in silence.

They woke up the first day and nobody had to say anything, as they prepared and ate their breakfast... At night, again, nobody had to say anything as they placed a candle in the center of the room and meditated around it in silence.

Eventually, a stronger wind threatened their light and one of the monks hastily said:

“Protect the candle!”

Surprised by his friend’s negligence, a second monk said:

“Who cares about the candle? Now you have broken your vow!”

Annoyed by this conversation, a third monk remarked:

“Shut up, you morons! We were supposed to keep quiet!”

So very proud of himself, the last remaining monk boasted:

“I was the only one who didn’t say anything!”

## Dogen arrives in China

A Japanese monk called Eisai once traveled to China and learned the authentic Chan from the Chinese masters. When he returned to Japan, it is said that he *also* imported the seeds of Japanese ceremonial tea – for his school would later be recognized as the first original and independent school of Zen in the Land of the Rising Sun.

A disciple from Eisai, called Myozen, would repeat the journey of his master and also travel to China, accompanied by a small group of his most promising students; among them, a certain monk called Dogen.

Myozen unfortunately died in China, from a tragic illness three years after his arrival. Dogen, on the other hand, would later return to Japan and become one of the most important figures in Zen literature. For many generations, even today, he keeps being considered by many Zen masters as their favorite writer.

In the case that follows, however, Dogen was still a student arriving in China, in 1223, under Myozen's tutelage.

After braving the sea for months, when the Japanese monks finally arrived at their destination in the region of Chekiang – home to the largest Zen temples in those days – the master was immediately granted access to a monastery, but his disciples would have to live another month in the boat, waiting for acceptance.

When the cook of a large monastery arrived at the docks to get some ingredients, Dogen took the opportunity to get some news about the place

where he was hoping to live and practice.

The cook was a friendly person and soon they had established a certain form of friendship, so Dogen felt comfortable asking:

“My admirable friend, why don’t you focus in practicing zazen [sitting meditation] and studying the scriptures with the teachings from old sages? Why would you burden yourself as a cook, wasting your precious time doing menial chores?”

The cook started coughing from laughing so hard and, when it finally stopped, he answered:

“My dear friend from a distant land, you have yet to understand the practice of zazen, or the meaning of the teachings from the ancient sages.”

Dogen didn’t know what to say.

## A perfect circle

A boy was playing on the beach when he noticed an old man with a stick, very focused on scribbling something over the sand. Curious, the child approached him to discover the elder had just finished drawing a perfect circle. The little one said:

“Hey, gramps, that’s amazing! How did you draw such a perfect circle?”

The old man said:

“I don’t know... I just tried it many times, and kept on trying... Here, you try it...”

The elder gave the stick to the boy and left. The kid immediately tried drawing a circle, but ended up with an egg. He tried it again, and again it produced a deformed ball.

He kept on trying and trying, until finally, one day, there it was: a perfect circle.

A few seconds later, he heard the voice of a child behind him, saying:

“Hey, gramps, that’s amazing...”

## Escaping?

A monk asked a Zen master:

“How can we escape from the Three Worlds of desire, form and emptiness?”

The master said:

“Escaping it? Why?”

## The mind is Buddha

A monk asked Baso:  
“What is Buddha?”  
The master replied:  
“The mind as it is; that’s Buddha.”

## There's no Buddha

A monk asked Baso:  
“What is Buddha?”  
The master replied:  
“There is no mind; there is no Buddha.”

## Fixed

Joshu asked Nansen:

“Those monks were saying ‘the mind is not Buddha; wisdom is not the Way’. Are they talking nonsense?”

Nansem confirmed it:

“Yes, what they say is nonsense.”

“And could you please correct it for me?”

Nansem conceded:

“The mind is not Buddha; wisdom is not the Way.”

## Building a tunnel

A young samurai called Zenkai had a sordid romance with his lord's wife and ended up killing the husband. To avoid execution, the couple ran away and lived together for a while as thieves.

But Zenkai was getting progressively more anxious and disgusted with himself. Eventually, he abandoned that life of crimes and became a lonely wandering beggar, hoping to atone for his past sins.

During one of his begging tours, Zenkai heard many stories about a dangerous road, where many travelers were hurt or killed from a great fall. Evaluating the spot, the beggar realized that a lot of suffering could be avoided by constructing a tunnel cutting through the stone, so that future travelers could avoid the dangerous trail.

Happy about discovering a good cause to which he could dedicate his life, Zenkai would beg during the day and work on the tunnel at night.

Almost thirty years went by like this, when a middle aged samurai came searching for the old beggar:

“You and my mother have conspired to kill my father. I have searched you for many years, and now I’m here to cut off your head.”

Zenkai said:

“What you said is the painful truth, and my worthless head is yours to take. However, though I know it is unfair, I will ask you to wait until I have finished working on this tunnel, for it will benefit many families and save a lot of people from trouble. As soon as I have finished it, you can cut

off my head.”

The samurai agreed to it and, for a few months, he observed in silence as Zenkai was working on the stone. One day, maybe somewhat impatient, the samurai started to help with the work. They toiled together for almost one year and the tunnel was finally done.

Zenkai immediately dropped his tools and said:

“Thank you for waiting so long. You can cut off my head now.”

The samurai bowed respectfully to the ground and said:

“Though I know it is unfair to my father, I could never take the head of my master.”

## Mutiny against Bankei

Bankei's temple attracted many students from everywhere, and the dormitories used to be always crowded.

On a certain occasion, one of the youngsters stole something from another and the case was brought to Bankei, but the master ignored it.

A few days later, the same youngster was again accused of stealing and, once more, the master administered no punishment. This incensed most of the students, who organized a riot in demand of "justice". They threatened to abandon the monastery *en masse*, if the thief was not expelled.

Bankei patiently listened to their complaints and said:

"My dear friends, I am really proud of you! I can see that everyone in here is very wise and can distinguish very clearly between what is right and what is wrong... You are ready to leave this temple right now and go anywhere else. However, this poor kid you are trying to expel had no one to teach him the difference between what is right and what is wrong. If I was to exclude a student like him, who would ever teach him? Considering all of this, I have already made a decision: I will keep this youngster here with me and I will teach him, even if everybody else decides to leave."

## Favoring Bankei

The new monastery cook decided that Bankei should be served special meals, preparing a fine delicacy meant for the master only.

Noticing that his meal was different from the others, the master scolded:

“If you believe my food should be special, you must be taking me for a person who doesn’t even deserve to eat!”

The master then locked himself in his room and refused to eat for seven days. During all this time, the cook was banging at the door and always pleading. The hunger strike only came to an end when the cook said:

“Maybe you are feeling alright, master, after fasting for so long; but I’m still young and I can’t take this hunger forever!”

Bankei hurriedly opened the door and smiled at his student:

“I want to eat the same thing that is being served to the most humble of our disciples. I want you to remember this well, when you become the master.”

## Remembering Bankei

A great number of laypeople joined the monks to pay their respects at Bankei's funeral. Among them, an old blind beggar who lived around the temple and thus addressed the other mourners:

"I cannot see the expression people have on their faces, so I have to form my opinion from the sound of their voices. For this reason, maybe it is only natural that I hear subtle details in that which sounds like uniformity to most.

"Many times, when I hear people talking, I can discern bright tones of envy concealed behind the happy voice that congratulates a friend. When some are crying about unfortunate circumstances surrounding their neighbors, I've often heard the tinkles of satisfaction adorning their consoling words.

"Master Bankei was the most honest person I've ever heard. When he spoke about happiness, all I could hear was happiness. When he spoke about sadness, all I could hear was sadness."

## Stones in the water

A Zen couple living in isolation at a mountain retreat lodged a traveling master from the capital, belonging to another Buddhist sect, who asked them for a place to spend the night.

The master coming from the city was a proud and elegant man, while the lay practitioners on the mountains looked like a couple of farmers. But regardless of the difference in their appearance and lifestyle, a natural friendship was discovered among them.

The following day, after walking together around a lake, they sat by its margins to meditate and, after a few minutes, the husband said:

“I’ll grab us some mats!”

He crossed the lake, running over the water, and came back with some straw mats from the hut. His wife said:

“I’ll take the cushions!”

And she too ran over the lake, on the water.

The master from the capital saw it as a Zen challenge against the “powers” of his own school:

“If something is possible in this world, there is no reason for the Zen sect to beat mine! Our faith in Amida can certainly achieve the same deed!”

There he went, trying to run over the lake and immediately sinking down. All wet and somewhat muddy, he tried it again and again; never losing his elegance, confidence, or determination.

Eventually, the wife asked the husband:

“Even though this is hilarious, shouldn’t we tell him by now where the stones are placed?”

## Dharma battle

Discourse and debate in early Buddhism from India can be compared to complicated mandalas, or long waltzes.

But in Zen Buddhism, things are different. Discourse and debate in Zen are usually short and murderous, like sword duels.

Zen is a school of directness and fearlessness. Its name has also become the most popular term, internationally, to a stereotype of Buddhism that doesn't necessarily represent the actual school. The "peaceful", "unburned" characteristic of Zen is about being peaceful and unburned right in the middle of the fire, and not about avoiding the fire, thinking about water, or appearing to be wet.

Incidentally, a traditional form of interview among Zen monks is called "dharma battle", or "dharma duel". This is a long-established custom in Zen. A "battle" of dharma.

But if words like battle and duel are simple enough to understand, the word "dharma", on the other hand, is so difficult to translate that most writers won't even try it. This ain't bad either. By context, on the long run, you will understand the word more deeply with no translation.

In this book, however, I will teach you how to cheat on this one. The first step is substituting the word "dharma" for the word "knowledge". This should work in most cases. In the present case, a translation should look like "battle (or duel) of knowledge". But if you stop there, the trick will

work against you. The knowledge in question, the one that can replace “Dharma”, is not necessarily *your ideas about knowledge*. It’s “Zen-knowledge”.

Let’s talk of *data versus information*.

“Data” is traditionally described as neutral, isolated symbols; while the term “information” is mostly applied to pertinent data, organized into something more meaningful than mere data.

In Western thought, “knowledge” refers to some higher level of abstraction or sophistication in the use of information and data. These are all linguistic, for all refer to different uses of symbols and representations.

“Zen knowledge”, however, is a different kind of beast. It is apart from data and information. It is not linguistic. Let’s try naming the suspects:

- Data: the temperature of the fire on my stove exceeds 600°F (this number is the highest my thermometer would measure).
- Information: the heat from a stove could burn you, causing pain and damage.
- Western knowledge: talking brilliantly about the fire, the burn, or the danger; learning to build a cook-top, or a better thermometer.
- Zen knowledge: getting yourself burned for the first time; directly experiencing what “getting burned” actually means; beyond language. All the things you could never really explain, or transmit to another person who has never got burned.

Notice that no amount of data or information could ever turn itself, just by itself, into this

“knowledge that means dharma”. This knowledge cannot be shared by symbols, but only “pointed at” by them.

Besides, when speaking about dharma, we are naturally referring to that specific non-linguistic knowledge *about enlightenment*. Getting burned, or having an orgasm are also related to some non-linguistic “knowledge”, but not necessarily “dharma”: the non-linguistic knowledge about the very essence of Buddhism.

This knowledge has no form; no material – even if, by metonymy, “the linguistic teachings and material practices” concerning this “personal, non-linguistic knowledge of enlightenment” are also often referred to as “dharma”. Further, the transcendental reality from which this knowledge is experienced and realized may sometimes too be called “dharma” (sometimes also “Buddha”). This cheat here is only meant to help you approaching the word; it is not meant to exhaust its meaning.

Now, join me in this lovely dharma battle from a long time ago, among children: a boy and a girl who lived in different temples, over the same mountain:

The boy once had the guts to confront the girl when they happened to meet upon a mountain trail. Very dignified (perhaps under the influence of Buddhism’s combative spirit in those days, or maybe because the girl produced a certain feeling in him) the boy was certainly copying his master and his enigmatic challenges, when he said:

“Where are you going?”

The girl smiled at him and replied:  
“Wherever my legs will take me...”

The boy had no clever answer for this kind of reply, so he tucked in his tail and ran away.

Back at the monastery, the little one shared the experience of his battle with his master, who gave him the following advice:

“Next time, start with the same question... When she says ‘wherever my legs will take me,’ you ask her: ‘But what if your legs disappeared?’”

The student was very happy with this advice from his master. He even started walking on the mountain longer and more often, for no apparent reason...

When the opportunity to confront his “rival” finally arrived, the boy was feeling very confident and superior:

“Where are you going?”

The girl smiled at him and said:

“Wherever the wind blows...”

Defeated once more, the boy left in silence and again consulted with his master, who told him:

“But wasn’t it obvious? Next time, you should asker her: ‘But what if the wind stops blowing?’”

The kid slapped his own knee, amazed at the adaptive wisdom of his master.

A few days later, he was at the village market when he saw the girl wandering among the stalls. With triumphant airs, again he asked her:

“And where are you going now? Let me guess... You’re going wherever the wind is blowing, but what if...”

At this point, the girl interrupted him:  
“Today I’m out to buy some vegetables.”

## The slippery road to Sekito

Yinfeng was leaving the monastery gate when Baso asked him:

“Where are you going?”

Yinfeng said:

“The monks have been talking about a master called Sekito, and I’m going to check on him...”

Baso warned him:

“The road to Sekito is a slippery one.”

Yinfeng dismissed it:

“My staff is right here with me! Even if I were to find some trouble on the road, I’d be prepared.”

Upon arriving at Sekito’s monastery, Yinfeng circled the master’s seat three times and struck on the ground with his staff once, asking:

“What is the essential teaching?”

Sekito answered:

“Blue sky! Blue sky!”

Yinfeng didn’t know what to say. Eventually, he mentioned the situation to Baso, who proposed:

“You should go back there and repeat your question. When he says ‘blue sky, blue sky’, you should mimic the sound of thunder twice.”

Yinfeng returned to Sekito and repeated his question:

“What is the essential teaching?”

Sekito made the sound of thunder twice.

Defeated, Yinfeng went back to Baso and told him the whole thing. Baso laughed and said:

“I told you the road to Sekito was a slippery one.”

## There's only this

Gosetsu wandered in search of a master who could spark his enlightenment. Upon meeting Sekito, he said:

“If you can produce a statement which has no dualisms, I will stay and learn from you. On the contrary, if you cannot produce such a statement, I will leave immediately.”

Sekito ignored him.

Gosetsu waved the sleeves from his tunic and turned his back to leave. When he arrived at the monastery gate, Sekito called him:

“Hey, professor!”

Gosetsu looked back and Sekito said:

“From birth to death, there's only this. Why did you turn your back?”

Upon hearing this, Gosetsu experienced his enlightenment.

Commentary:

Gosetsu imposed himself on the hospitality of master Sekito – besides, he was accompanied by some unfitting attitudes. His beginner's mind was neglected.

Sekito was charitable enough to ignore him.

Gosetsu, blind to both wisdom and kindness, waves the sleeves from his tunic and turns to leave.

The master lets him walk to the gate before calling:

“Hey, professor!”

Being called, Gosetsu has to turn back.

The phrase *from birth to death, there's only this* eliminates the dualism. This knocks at the door, but doesn't open it.

Sekito attacks again, immediately; leaving no time for the monk to get back on his feet:

“Why did you turn your back?”

This is just enough to pay for the rest of the bill.

But let me ask *you*:

What was the meaning of Sekito ignoring Gosetsu?

Why did Gosetsu look back, when he was called?

*From birth to death, there's only this...* What does it mean?

Poem:

Ten thousand things: one truth.

You have to see it for yourself.

The way of Zen is silence; not chatter.

Smart words can only point at it.

## Zen math

A nun was entering the monastery gate, when Joshu asked her:

“Where have you been?”

The nun said:

“I was visiting master Ungo.”

In ancient monasteries, people probably had few opportunities to get news from outsiders, and Joshu took this one:

“And what did brother Ungo have to say?”

The nun said:

“When I was there, a monk asked him: ‘What happens when a deer fits its antlers into a bush, at night?’ Master Ungo said: ‘One times one equals one.’”

Joshu approved of it:

“I can see this brother Ungo is very healthy and well set in his life...”

The nun who was talking to Joshu also took her own opportunities to get some interesting news:

“And how about you, master? What would *you* say about that moment at night, when a deer fits its antlers into a bush?”

Joshu said:

“I have nothing to add here... Two divided by two equals one.”

## Coming and going?

I was watching a documentary on Japanese monasteries once, and a journalist asked a nun why did she leave the comforts and technology of modern society, to live in a place that was kind of frozen in medieval times. The nun was laughing, as she replied:

“Because I wanted to live intensely.”

Upon hearing her answer, my understanding was deepened.

By some strange coincidence, it was precisely living like this, intensely, that the Zen master at Mount Kuei enjoyed another ordinary day, when he received the visit of a friend.

One should always keep in mind the unreality of words.

The one arriving was Liu Tiemo – and she was certainly his friend. But a friendly visit? Hardly...

Liu Tiemo was born a peasant and discovered Zen Buddhism when she was very young. After experiencing enlightenment, she would quickly become one of the most feared characters in the history of the sect.

Famous for her intractable temper, Liu was such a strong, aggressive and invincible opponent in dharma duels, the other monks affectionately nicknamed her “The Iron Grindstone”.

Master Hsueh Tou had this to say about her:

*“The answers from the Iron Grindstone nun were like collision sparks – like lightening. At the*

*slightest opening, she would take away your body and your life. After many years of studying and practicing complete awesome presence, sharpening her skill, she was like a naked blade dangling around.”*

Unfortunately, despite the frequent mentions to The Iron Grindstone, I could only find two cases that directly involved the nun Liu Tiemo – and I only liked one of them.

The other one felt like a bitter revenge from some nameless monk: a story where the Iron Grindstone supposedly gets the short end of a stick. I, myself, could find no teachings worth sharing in that story – but simply an unspeakable judgment we are supposed to accept by mere trust (perhaps also a little bit of resentment).

Before we proceed, it should also be mentioned that these patch-robed monks from ancient times (averse to the sanctimony and flattery of those rich monks who were connected to the nobles, and always ready to move themselves away from the so called “respectability” and its hypocrisies) used to give each other endearing nicknames like “bag of rice” (implying a class of useless monks who did nothing but stuff their own bellies with the rice from donations), or “dirty rag”, and also maybe “old pervert” etc.

Having that in mind, it is easier to see how the old master at Mount Kuei received Liu Tiemo with a friendly greeting and, at the same time, a challenge for a duel:

“There you are, you old cow! Where are you coming from?”

The Iron Grindstone, unfazed, replied:  
“Tomorrow, there’s a great feast at Mount Tai.  
Will you join them, professor?”

It should be mentioned that Mount Tai is some five hundred miles away from Mount Kuei.

Kuei Shan relaxed his body and dropped on floor.

Liu Tiemo left.

Commentary from the master who registered this case:

Old master Kuei was lucky enough to keep a trick up his sleeve, lest he got some of that iron grinder.

## Do it for yourself

A certain monk would always wake up earlier than the others and start cleaning the monastery by himself.

“Am I the only one around here who’s able to wake up at the appropriate time?” – he would mutter to himself, while sweeping the garden.

“We are supposed to have an orderly life in here, but this lazy scum is worthless!” – one could hear him moaning while dusting a statue.

He was secretly hoping the master would some day witness his “bravery” and punish the “impudence” of the rest. This never happened, though, for the master himself would only wake up with the others.

Eventually, this monk was unable to deal with his ever-growing frustration and confided the matter with his master, who asked him:

“When you wake up early and start cleaning the temple, who are you doing it for?”

The monk was dumbstruck and remained in silence. The master himself answered:

“You are doing it for yourself. This is what *you* want, isn’t it? So when you do something, admit it to yourself that you’re doing it for yourself. Stop pretending you are doing it for others.”

## Stinking

On his way to a congregation, a monk stepped on a turd, but didn't notice it.

For the rest of the day, this monk was very angry at everybody around him, for they were all stinking.

## Mokkei-zaru Zenga

*Zenga* (which literally means “Zen sketch”) is the style of painting and calligraphy developed in relation to Zen Buddhism.

*Mokkei-zaru* (“Mokkei-monkey”, or rather “monkey à la Mokkei”) is a term meant to describe a certain aesthetic current within the universe of Zenga – a particular style, strongly influenced by a Chinese painter called Muqi (the Japanese will pronounce it “Mokkei”) – specially noticeable in his way of drawing monkeys; typically with very long arms.



DETAIL FROM “GUANYIN, MONKEYS, AND CRANE”  
MUQI FACHANG - CHINA (8TH CENTURY)

These “monkeys à la Mokkei” – depicted while trying to catch the reflection of the moon over the water – are a frequent theme in Zen art.

But why?

The short answer is this: because of a parable told by the Buddha.

For a long answer, pardon me as I step into the mud, so that we can approach a very serious matter in our society. This problem gets more and more neglected, the more we blindly accept the models surreptitiously imposed on us (not only to explain the observed phenomena, but specially to limit and to define them).

The usual words – like mind, spirit, heart and language – will be temporarily skipped for the sake of bluntness and indiscretion. I am guessing that most of us feel quite alien to these concepts; like we don't really know anything practical about them. So let us focus, now, in those parts of our lives that feel more popular and familiar; more tangible, and maybe more approachable.

Let us talk about our muscles.

Gaining muscle takes effort, but effort alone will make your muscles sick. If one is to develop a healthy, athletic body, the muscles also need to rest and to stretch periodically, lest they won't grow healthy and athletic.

After straining, the muscles will actually grow when at rest. But you already knew about it, didn't you? Without stretching, muscles become a weird freakish mass of rigidity and cramps; unable to perform the healthy, athletic activities which motivated you to train them to begin with.

Training their muscles in ignorant obsession – with no rest, nor stretching – one might even fall in love with the resulting deformation; but their health and their mobility would be actually improved by interrupting their “training”.

But why is this significant? Because even at

its most basic and casual level, the practice of Zen is the resting and the stretching of the mind; it is the mental activity (or lack of activity) that can balance and enrich your conscious mental efforts from pulling, grabbing and building; all our daily strain from artificially programmed intellectual contraptions and contractions.

The state of “simply being” one can develop in meditation works at the same time as relaxation to our “symbolic muscles” (by not-thinking), and as a stretching of our very consciousness – which is pushed towards an immediate contact with the incessant flow of the world; holding nothing and rejecting nothing; a “non-representative” contact with our minds and existence.

Lacking familiarity with this non-linguistic experience, we tend to develop a certain rigidity of alienation, proper to those who are victims to an unconscious confusion between what is illusion and what is reality.

The West is already acquainted with at least one allegory that illustrates this sort of alienation (the confusion between appearances and reality): Plato’s Cave – where the inhabitants of a cave confuse the shadows over the walls for the objects in themselves, until finally the philosopher finds a way out of the dungeon and discovers, “out there”, the “sun” of “reality”.

However, Western thought was developed along the obsession with the human talent for symbolic representation. Convinced that *reality* was something hidden in “deeper ideas”, it finally declared: “*Reality is only that which is liable to be*

*rigorously reconstructed in the universe of human language.”*

Buddhism avoids this trap, by noticing and transcending the fundamental unreality of words.

If this sounds too complicated, let's go back to practical stuff we all know: our eyes – and also, related to our eyes, the incredible machine we have created to mimic them: the camera. In our knowledge about the camera, lies a knowledge about the eyes.

Light crosses the lenses and forms an image over the film; or the brain. The pictures registered by the camera and also the images we see cannot be called “reality”. Those are pictorial recreations. Illusions. Nothing but images.

Just as the camera captures the image inside its body, our vision is also formed behind our eyes – creating an inner universe of shapes and colors, not that different from our language, which is an inner universe of thoughts and ideas. Different forms of representation, but still representations.

The eyes can't reach outside themselves and grab things. Language can't reach outside itself and fish reality. These inner universes are made of subjective recreations; images formed inside of us. They are like intimate photographs; like a very private cinema, or library. By their fundamental nature, these recreations are necessarily different from the world itself – like a painting of you and also a book about you are not you.

Our hearing is yet another inner universe of representation – one inhabited by sounds – but nobody thinks the noise from a car, or the image

of a car are “more real” than the car itself.

But when we come to thinking, most are eager to take the idea of things for the “real things”. People even confuse their thoughts with their own identities. Our very philosophy has decided that “reality can be found only through the ideas we have about things.”

You can close your eyes, after this paragraph, and try to recreate in your mind the sound of a speeding car, or the face of a person you love.

Is that reality?

But this is what you’re doing, when you think and measure; you’re doing it with language.

Centuries of infinite complications and cruel headaches have blossomed from this childish identification between the human self, reality and language. Fortunately, we are now ready, at least, to establish the limits of science and philosophy: they coincide with the limits of language.

If I say “a piece of wood”, this gives form to a symbolical ghost in the human mind. Again, if we say “this piece of wood has the measures of X, Y and Z,” we are only adding detail to the ghost – it couldn’t convert a ghost into “reality”, nor can a ghost determine what is real. It is outside reality.

What measuring actually determines is which parts of reality are liable to be manipulated by our language with great advantage, after converting it into detailed, socially transmissible ghosts.

Symbols are so different from reality, they are static and independent. In reality, nothing stays and everything incessantly transforms; but the idea of “one” – of pounds and miles – may remain

frozen; apart from the rest of the world. In the photograph of a tree, leaves won't sake, or fall.

*The idea of a flower*, in Plato's Theory of Ideas, is supposed to be "reality itself"; more real than the actual flower; a separate, independent entity. In reality, however, a flower can only exist in its relation to the ground, the wind, the water, the bees, the light of the sun... A flower can only exist as a part of everything else that exists. "Their only reality would be found in their cosmic union."

So maybe that *philosopher's sun* in Plato's Cave was more akin to the red glow of volcanic magma; still deeper into the earth than the initial cave. Taking reality for "only that which can be measured" is nothing but a new dress to Plato's Theory of Ideas. Now, the "sun of the philosopher" seems to be the brightness from some television.

The following parable told by the Buddha is like a "negative" version of Plato's cave. Both share the same theme: an illustration of people who confuse appearances and reality. However, instead of the sun, here we have the moon.

Contextualized, Plato's Cave implies reality is to be found in the World of Ideas. The Buddhist parable, in opposition, implies that our language (the World of Ideas) is the very illusion that fools will take for reality.

This is not the point, but here I am; covered in mud and in a playful disposition, so: who is right?

Personally (flippantly and irresponsibly, while smiling) I would like to propose two experiments:  
Follow the Buddha's finger and discover the

moon beyond language. Dive into the flow of the world, now. Transcend language and find reality on your own. Experience the truth of the universe as your own life. This is the experiment I see as superior.

However, if you are unwilling to make that leap, restricting us to technical-scientific analysis – symbolic, intellectual ones; measurements – I still have something to say: countless adepts of Buddhism have declared personal realization. They have been talking about it in the same way, for thousands of years. Their heaven is here; in life. You will never find a Buddhist text saying things like “the more dharma, the more pain.”

Our philosophers and scientists, on the other hand, are arguing for many centuries; and who among them is ever satisfied? Each one of these “masters” points at a different direction, while producing exhaust pipes, gadgets programmed to fail when their warranty expires, also trans-fatty biscuits and atom bombs. Their wisdom is pain.

Good luck trying to relativize that.

Of course the benefits from technology are also obvious – I have no intention of avoiding the truth – but science and technology has nothing to do with revealing “Ultimate Reality”, or even what is “good”. It’s about building machines.

Technology is like a sword – an artificial tool, which naturally obeys the will of those who wield it. That’s all.

This sword is often helpful in situations we couldn’t solve with our hands, or teeth. It will sometimes protect us. Sometimes, it will marvel

us. Usually, it will hurt and oppress us; giving us dissatisfaction and pain.

In other words, *language* (the human skill of recreating perceived objects as inner symbolic ghosts in a subjective world, where these “objects” can be manipulated in meticulous, controlled and revisable ways – both socially and historically) was turned into the basis of a closeted religion, preaching the gospel of not being a religion. But if measurements determine reality, this is treating human language as “God”, or “God” as a human.

If this focused use of language uncovered huge possibilities, like vaccines, these are nothing but a side-quest to the bombs – for using language in this fashion will inevitably turn into a disease.

Our use of language must be tempered by the wisdom that reaches beyond language – by the resting and stretching of the mind; by using words as just words and not “reality”; by transcending the illusory pathological identification between thoughts, self and reality.

From Heidegger’s proud remark (“only that which can be measured is real”), emerge several complicated things – theories, systems, incredible machines – and perhaps it is easy getting lost in their midst; but what about those things which are most important?

What is the nature of human beings? What is good for us? How should we live? How to deal with suffering and death?

What do science, philosophy and technology – immersed in their “World of Ideas” – have to offer about those? Nothing but endless discussion and empty blah blah blah.

Buddhism, however, has some good news: your true nature is paradise. You can see it for yourself. You can *only* see it for yourself.

The mind is like a mirror. Representations are not real, but images over a pool of water; they have no real substance; they are illusions.

If attachments are formed to these illusions (or reflected images in the mind), we become scared and destined to suffer, for they are always changing. But something else, behind change, won't change. Experiencing this is like touching ground; like returning home.

Think of a soap bubble, floating harmlessly in the air. For a split second, at a glance, it might be interpreted as a stone flying at you. Realizing the mistake, of course, brings relief. Should a puddle of water feel distressed over reflecting the fire? Or proud and petulant upon reflecting beauty? Can any reflection change the nature of the water?

When we recognize our own nature for what it really is, we also discover, or rather experience, that everything is already pure and perfect – that good and evil, pain and pleasure are like bubbles on the surface of a flowing river.

But even if we can speak and write about this form of realization, the *ideas about Buddhism*, or the *linguistic understanding* (the philosopher's "reality") is not the actual realization Buddhists talk about. I can talk about you, but this talk is not you. In other words, the part of Zen that we can "understand" is not Zen – it is *about* Zen.

Thus, reality and realization are to be found only after we have realized the unreality of our

language, sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Reality, both for humans and to the world – the one that can answer important questions – could never be contained by any of the human senses. Reality is their source, and not a product of their efforts. Reality gives form to our senses (or, again, representations); not the other way around.

This human experience of reality is intimate and unspeakable. It cannot be measured, nor shared as an idea; but it certainly can be directly experienced, if you “let go of the branch” and dive inside yourself.

Anyway, here is the parable that came to fill Buddhism with monkeys:

Five hundred monkeys were enchanted by the reflection of the moon at the bottom of a well. This well was very deep, so one of the monkeys held to a branch over it, as the others formed a line by holding hands; reaching for that “moon” at the bottom of the well.

When all the monkeys were hanging from it, the branch broke under their weight and they fell into the water. It was only after falling that the monkeys noticed the real moon, up in the sky.

This parable of the monkeys and the illusion of the moon reflected on the water has produced some curious Buddhist expressions, like “ignorant monkey” (癡猴, chikou), which means “a mind in unenlightened confusion, taking the reflection for the moon” and also “monkey-heart” (心猿, shin'en), to qualify a mind as restless as a monkey, in its pursuit of the objects of desire.

## Letting go of the branch

Monkeys  
Keep on stretching,  
Trying to catch  
Reflections;  
Until death  
Makes them fall.

If they let go  
Of the branch;  
If they dive into deep waters,  
Their whole world  
Would most graciously  
Shine.



"MONKEY"  
HAKUIN - JAPAN (8TH CENTURY)

To reflect upon

The wood  
Knows nothing about the ashes.  
The ashes  
Know nothing about the wood.

## The body is firewood

Ryonen was born as the precious girl from a powerful family. From early childhood, she was considered extraordinarily beautiful and smart; so nobody was surprised when she received the honor of serving the empress.

Years later, when this empress suddenly passed away, Ryonen was greatly affected by it. This forceful contact with the impermanence of life would lead her into abandoning everything – husband and children included – and becoming a Buddhist nun.

But starting her journey would prove difficult, for she was repeatedly rejected when trying to join a monastery.

Women were not unusual in the Buddhist monasteries; it was Ryonen herself who was too unusual. Even if the masters could recognize her honest devotion, they would all eventually say the same thing:

“If I were to take you in, unfortunately, your remarkable beauty and elegance will certainly cause trouble among the monks already under my care.”

The Second Patriarch cut off one of his arms to prove his sincerity. Ryonen raised a red-hot iron to her own face, deforming it.

Next, she wrote a poem in the back of a mirror and delivered it to master Hakuo. The poem reads:

To serve the empress,  
I used to burn incense  
Over my clothes.

Now, a homeless beggar,  
I have burned my face  
To enter the Way.

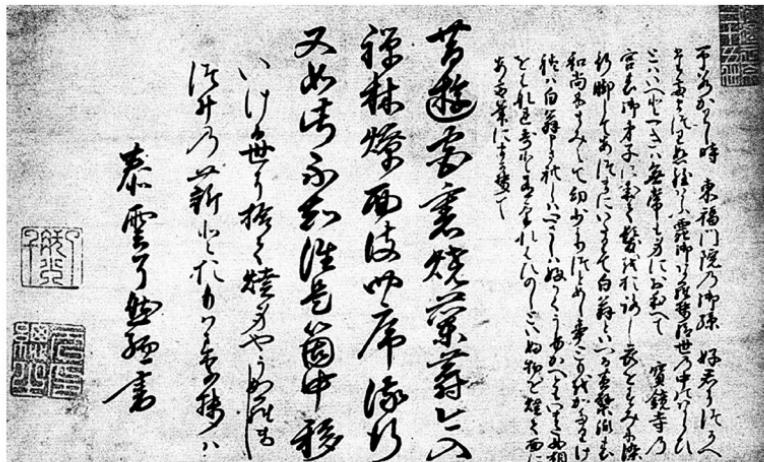
Seasons also change;  
But who is watching  
All these changes?

In this transitory world  
This body I leave behind  
Could only be really deformed  
If I thought about it  
As something more  
Than firewood.

Master Hakuo immediately accepted Ryonen and eventually they became good friends. When the master passed away, she replaced him as the abbess and remained a leader at his temple, until she could find a suitable successor, worthy of her master's legacy. Having done that, she left his temple and became the founder of her own.

Besides being a Zen legend after this story, Ryonen is also admired as an artist. She was a great calligrapher, painter, poetess and scholar.

Honoring tradition, most Eastern painters and calligraphers adopted a style from the ancient masters. Ryonen, however, developed her own style. You can take a peek at it in the following picture, where she tells her own story with a brush.



CALLIGRAPHY

RYONEN GENSO - JAPAN (CA. 1700)



TSUBA

(GUARD OVER A SWORD'S GRIP, PROTECTING THE HAND)  
WITH BUDDHIST THEME

UNKNOWN AUTHOR - JAPAN (CA. 1700)

## Notes from a samurai

The following fragments were originally written in the early 18th century, in the notebook of a samurai.

In these texts, we can glimpse at the influence of Zen pervading the thoughts of the Japanese medieval warrior; we can also notice which were the most interesting aspects of practice, from their point of view, and how they used Zen in daily life:



A good perspective is seeing the world as a dream. When you are having a nightmare, you wake up and realize it was only a dream.

It is known that this world in which we live is not really different from that.



If a person refuses to quit, from this alone one embodies the power of two.



You can achieve anything, as long as you only consider your tasks for the day. For a single day, a samurai should be able to take anything.

Tomorrow, also, is only a day.



To raise yourself against injustice, while maintaining your own purity, is a very difficult thing to achieve. [Fighting monsters, one becomes a monster.]

Besides, when people believe “being correct” is the highest possible achievement – aiming all their efforts towards this kind of superficiality – contrary to expectation, this obsession will only lead to a tragic succession of mistakes.

The Way lies much deeper than correctness.

The wisdom to appreciate these remarks is very difficult to realize – but when it is realized, it is the highest possible wisdom. From this point of view, things like correctness are pretty shallow.

One has to understand this sort of thing on their own. It cannot be explained.

As a last resort to those who can’t understand the Way by themselves, there is also a method: it is listening to other people. Even those with little wisdom still have the opportunity to listen from an external perspective.

Think of the saying in the game of Go: “The one looking from outside has eight eyes.”

Another saying goes: “Meeting idea after idea, we get to realize our own mistakes.” This is also indicative of a way in learning from others.

So pay attention to the stories of other people and read their books; both to weaken your own discriminations and to consider what has already been lived and learned by others.



There was once a painter in China who loved dragons. He would paint dragons, collect figures of dragons, wear clothes adorned with dragons and was always talking about dragons.

This was reported to the King of Dragons, who sent one of his servants to investigate the case.

When the painter met with a real dragon by his window, he died of a heart attack.

Notice how some people love to talk grandly about their favorite fantasies; but when they are faced with reality, they don't know what to do.



Many complain about the helmet in a samurai armor being too heavy.

However, when attacking a castle, or a fort – with stones, arrows and splints of wood flying at you from all directions – there's never anybody around you complaining about their helmets.



Among those who took water lightly, many have drowned.



The way of the samurai is found in death.

When you face a decision between life and death, there is actually nothing to decide; there is only the quick step towards death. This is actually not difficult. One only has to be determined, and to advance.

To think dying before achieving your goals is a dog's death is the way of frivolous, sophisticated people. When pressed between life and death, a samurai has a ready-made decision.

We all have a desire to live – it is true. Our thinking is usually prone to follow whatever is pleasing. But neglecting your goals to preserve your life is cowardice. The line between the desire to live and cowardice is very thin.

Dying before attaining your goals can surely be considered a dog's death, or even fanaticism – however, there is no shame in it. This is the way of the samurai.

If one is determined everyday, living as if the body was already dead, one attains freedom in the Way.



If one starts making distinctions between public areas and their own private chambers, or thinking in a different way about the battlefield and the *dojo*, there will be no time for corrections

when confronting the real thing.

An adequate awareness must be kept at all times. If you could not find people displaying valor over the tatami, you would never find them on the battlefield.



It doesn't matter if you are an aristocrat or a farmer, rich or poor, old or young, enlightened or confused... We are all equals in death.

Are people unaware of the fact that we are all going to die? Of course not – but they hold on to illusions and try to cover the sun with a sieve.

We all know death may come at any time, but we secretly believe that everyone else will die first and that we ourselves will be the last ones to go. From this point of view, death is always far away.

But those who delight in this illusion put themselves in a very frail situation; so useless in dealing with death, it seems like a joke inside a dream.

Death is always near. One must understand that “when the time comes” is identical to “right now”.



Those who lack previous resolve concerning the inevitability of death are certain to die badly.

When a person is previously resolved about death, how could they ever behave shamefully?



A samurai was recently brought to shame for hesitating when opportunity of revenge arrived.

The way of revenge is forcing a path until the point where they cut you down.

Doing this, there is no shame.

If you start considering what needs to be done, the opportunity will fade. Thinking about the number of the enemy, the lay of the land and so on, time slips away and opportunity is gone.

It doesn't matter if you are alone, against a thousand enemy soldiers – there is realization in confronting this with your heart set on cutting them all down, starting from anywhere. Doing this, the main part of the job will have been done.

When disaster arrives, there is no time for thinking. If you lack previous determination, the affair will probably end up in shame.

We read books and have conversations so that we are prepared with prior determination when such unforeseen events confront us.

If people understood the way of the samurai as the awareness that nobody can predict what will happen next, it would be difficult to belittle their interpretation. Because of this, samurai do their preparation beforehand.

Victory and defeat depend on whimsical forces of transitory circumstances. The way of avoiding shame is different. All that is needed is to stare at the eyes of death, unflinchingly.

Even when defeat is most assured, fight back.

Technique and learning have nothing to do with this. A real person doesn't care about victory and defeat. They simply advance, fearlessly, towards an irrational death. Doing this, you will awaken from your dream.



There is a great teaching pouring down with a thunderstorm.

Suddenly faced with heavy rain, some try to avoid it by running hastily. However, this will get you even wetter.

If the rain is hard enough, even following the eaves of nearby buildings and other improvised covers around your path will not protect you from getting wet.

When you are resolved from the beginning, you will not be disturbed – even if this also cannot prevent you from getting wet.

This teaching has infinite applications.



In his book on military strategy, Yui Shosetsu speaks briefly about the nature of karma.

He mentions receiving oral instruction on eighteen chapters about courage, but not taking any notes, nor committing anything to memory. He simply payed attention to what was being said and forgot about it.

Later, when pressed by real danger, he would

act on impulse and the things he had learned in those lectures would become a wisdom that was truly his.

This is the nature of karma.



Human life is very short. It is best doing the things you enjoy. Don't waste your life on hateful tasks, day after day. Whenever possible, enjoy life. But never mention things like this in front of children and young people, because this freedom might become very harmful if misinterpreted by immaturity.



There is a proper way of raising the children of a samurai: from an early age, bravery is to be encouraged. Children should not be scared, or teased for frivolous reasons.

If a person is marked by fear as a child, the trauma can last for a lifetime. It is wrong to make children afraid of lightening, or prone to avoiding dark places. It is also wrong to tell scary stories so a child will stop crying. Besides, a child becomes shy if too severely reprimanded.

Bad habits must be avoided before they set. Once a bad habit was acquired, even scolding the child will accomplish nothing.

Proper speech, behavior and etiquette can be gradually introduced.

Never allow children to come in contact with greed for money and material possessions.

If the children are normal, living in a healthy environment, these principles should suffice for their healthy development.

However, if parents have a bad relation, the children will become unfilial. This is only natural. Even birds and beasts are transformed by the things they repeatedly see and hear.

The family relation will also deteriorate if one of the parents is a fool and loves one child above everything else – creating partialities when the other parent corrects the child. If a parent becomes an accomplice of a child against the other parent, this will create discord in the family.

It is because of their superficiality that some parents think of their children as support for an old age.



When samurai are young, they often expose themselves to shame engaged in inappropriate homosexual relations. It is very dangerous not to educate the young about this matter.

As I could find no suitable material providing this sort of information to young people, here I will offer a brief summary of the most important points.

Our romantic feelings for another person – be they men, or women – are supposed to last for the whole life. When lovers lack this determination, any romance involving them is not different from

prostitution. A warrior in love is like any other person.

Ihara Saikaku composed the verses currently in vogue: “A teenage boy with no older lover is like a woman without a husband” – but of course these are ridiculous words, from lascivious people.

A young samurai must test an older lover for at least five years. If by then he is assured of the older man’s intention, accepting the relationship will bring them no shame.

A lascivious person cannot commit themselves to a profound relationship, eventually casting their lovers away.

If the partners are able to support each other and to dedicate their lives to one another, things are appropriate and this assures their good luck. But if one of the partners is vile, the other one should resolutely sever their relations.

If the vile partner asks for reasons, one should say that this is a secret which we are taking to our graves. If the vile one insists, you should expose your anger. If he continues with his demands, it is time to cut him down.

The older man, too, must be assured of the young one’s intention; using the same method that was previously mentioned. If the young one can dedicate himself to the situation for some five or six years, there will be no shame.

Above everything else, the One Way must not be divided into two. A samurai must be devoted to *Bushido* at all times and act accordingly.



Nobody should have to say that a soldier with the right resolve wants to join the vanguard when the army is attacking, and to cover the rearguard when its retreating.

When attacking, they never neglect waiting for the right moment. While waiting for the right moment, they never neglect their attack.



Nothings exists aside from this moment. One should maintain a vigorous awareness of right now. A human life is nothing but an incessant succession of moments.

When this moment is thoroughly understood, one has reached the Other Shore; the searching is over.

Live with a focused determination on the now. People let the present moment slip away, focused on other things, and later will search for it in the wrong places. Most people don't even notice it. If you are able to understand this, you can grow spiritually from one experience to the other.

When a human being thoroughly understands one moment, this experience will transform them – even if they never think about it again.



To maintain your mind in a single continuous breath, so that evil finds no place to hold. This is the Way.



Even if you believe it's impossible, it's right in front of your eyes.



This is a saying from the master Bankei:

“You cannot be enlightened by the power of others, nor by any personal powers of your own. Just cut off all your memories about the past, all your expectations about the future and all your thoughts on present concerns. Doing this, the Great Way will present itself in front of your eyes.”



Ordinary people will sometimes see “a great artist” in a person who is actually a great fool.

Because of their folly, they can only think of a single thing, do a single thing, and never learn anything else. Doing this, they become skillful in

a single thing. Such a person is useless.



Ordinary people also tend to see a “genius” in those who adorn themselves with superficial knowledge. Using guile and flattery to deceive others, most times they even deceive themselves. This kind of person is even inferior to a simpleton.

A simpleton is honest and direct. When you investigate your own heart like a simpleton, there are no hidden places.

This is actually a great practice. We should behave in such a way that, when confronted with this practice, we are not ashamed.



Fish can't live where the water is too clear. If some plants or algae appear, on the other hand, the fish can hide under its shadow and thrive.



If you need to test your armor before a battle, you should only test the front plates.

If you are cut down, it is important to fall with your body facing the enemy camp, and never with your back towards it.

It doesn't matter if your armor is dirty and scratched, giving a bad impression – but special

attention must be given to the appearance of your helmet; for this is the part which might represent you at the enemy camp.



Ordinary people believe complicated matters can be solved by simply thinking long and hard about them.

However, this unfailingly leads to perverted thinking that amounts to no good, for ordinary people will usually build their logic around their own selfishness.



After attaining the highest level of human wisdom, a person gives the impression of not knowing anything.



A samurai addressed one of his friends thus:

“When facing an opponent, I feel that everything is going dark all of a sudden. Because of this, I always end up badly hurt. You, on the other hand, has faced a number of brave warriors, but never received a wound. How?”

The other samurai said:

“When I faced my opponents, of course I have also experienced this darkness taking over me.

However, if I could manage to ease my heart in that moment, it was like being at night, but under a full moon. When I attack from this state of mind, I feel like nothing specially difficult is going on, and escaping unharmed seems easy and natural."

This is really how things develop in combat, at the moment of truth.

## Meeting the Fourth Patriarch

Si-ma was only seven years old by the time he became a Buddhist monk, but his first master was notoriously unfit to teach.

When a fourteen-year-old Si-ma had a chance to talk with the Third Patriarch of Zen, he was feeling blocked:

“Great venerable sage, I make an appeal to your mercy: please, teach me the wisdom that will liberate me.”

Sengcan, the Third Patriarch of Zen, was deeply touched:

“How awful! Who was responsible for locking you away, child?”

Si-ma was confused:

“N... Nobody has locked me anywhere, sir.”

The master smiled:

“Then what do I need to teach you?”

Dumbstruck, the boy was enlightened.

Si-ma took Sengcan as his new master and followed him for nine years. Later, he received Bodhidharma's robe and bowl from Sengcan and became the Fourth Patriarch of Zen.

His monastic name was Daoxin.

And some say *Zen* is weird...

After that first burst of what would eventually become a recurrent cycle of persecution against Buddhists, Daoxin would experience harassment in the opposite direction.

The new emperor was very eager to meet and reward Buddhists sages and saints. He naturally invited the Fourth Patriarch of Zen to his castle, but the monk refused to go.

Three times the emperor sent an invitation. Three times Daoxin refused him. This incensed the emperor, who ordered his soldiers to quickly produce either that monk, or his head.

When the soldiers arrived at Daoxin's temple and made their solemn proclamation in the name of the emperor, the Fourth Patriarch lowered his head – stretching his neck, so the soldiers could easily cut it. But the soldiers were all too afraid to do it, finally returning to the castle with nothing.

Hearing of what had happened, the emperor now effusively praised the Fourth Patriarch. He remarked on the man's bravery and pointed him as an example to be followed.

## Ancient words from Daoxin

When the eyes see external objects, no objects “enter” the eyes.

When the mirror reflects a face, there is no face “entering” the mirror. There is nothing inside the mirror, nor does it “reach out” for faces.

However, when the mind reacts to sensorial stimulation, the result is usually interpreted by most as something external. Only practice and learning can reveal the fundamental emptiness of such mind patterns. Those are not “things”; they form no separate, independent entities.

The experiences of the mind are created by circumstance; they do not come from anywhere, nor do they depart towards anything.

When you can regularly experience your thoughts, your feelings and differentiations in the mind as empty, your practice is becoming stable.

Ease your mind and keep it free from vines and thorns of attachment to the bubbles in this continuous flow of the thoughts and feelings which arise from sensorial stimulation. This is serenity. This is perfect awareness; the end of anxiety. This is what we call liberation.

When you are immersed in the afflictions of the mind and its agonizing confusions, or even if you are drowned in deep thoughts about wisdom, you have to be able to detach yourself from it all and return to the original root. If you can do this at will, then your mind is already peaceful and pure.

Be fearless. Do not shy away. Do not be lazy. Straight forward!

No, no, no...

A monk asked Daoxin:

“How can we train, control or focus the mind in the proper way, attaining purity and clarity in enlightenment?”

The Fourth Patriarch said:

“Enlightenment is not a result of thinking the right thoughts about the Buddha. It is not about controlling the mind, focusing the mind, nor even training the mind. It is not attained by reflecting on the sutras – it is not an intellectual process. It is not found in avoiding illusion. Enlightenment comes from an identification with the natural rhythm of reality. Do not reject whatever was formed in your mind. Do not force anything to stay, because of attachments.”

## The frying pan and the fire

Rejecting the world of forms;  
Attaching yourself to emptiness –  
This is only shifting  
The location of the disease.

Climbing a boat on fire,  
So you won't drown.

## Poor thief

A young Ryokan lived in a monastery for some indeterminate time, but finally “gave up studying and pursued the life of a saint.”

The poet became a wandering beggar; later, a reclusive beggar, establishing himself in a lonely mountain retreat, at the familiar surroundings of his home town.

Despite being very poor, Ryokan became some sort of a celebrity as a Zen master, calligrapher and poet. We can assume he sometimes received fancy presents and maybe this is the reason his humble hut was often visited by thieves.

Once, Ryokan was surprised by a burglar in the middle of the night, but there was nothing to steal.

The poet said:

“You have walked alone, so far into these mountains, in such a cold dark night... It is really a shame that I have nothing for you to take. Please, accept these clothes I’m wearing.”

The freezing burglar accepted it and ran away, probably much confused. A lonely Ryokan (naked and certainly also freezing) wrote a poem that night; worried about a poor wayfarer, wandering all alone and in fear, in such a cold night – when even a storm was beginning to form!

On another occasion, a robber took all he could find in the poet’s little hut – even an improvised straw mat. Here is a poem about it:

*Forgotten by a thief:  
The moon in the window.*

## The geisha

On a festival occasion, Ryokan “disguised” himself as a woman and started dancing among the villagers.

See it for yourself: an old tattered man, with disheveled hair; very tall and very thin; living in a thatched hut in the mountains – who everybody in that village knew very well – pretending that he was a refined and elegant geisha, who nobody in the village had ever seen...

All of this, with his own improvised disguise, assuredly manufactured on a very low budget...

One of the villagers said to a friend, in a very loud voice to make sure that Ryokan could hear it:

“Hey, did you notice that beautiful stranger, dancing like a goddess?”

It is said that, on hearing this, Ryokan showed great pleasure and pride.

## Starfish

Ryokan was walking along the beach, shortly after a great storm.

Hundreds of starfishes had been thrown by the waves into the sand and, thus exposed to the rising sun, they were starting to die.

The master would pick up starfishes, one by one, and throw them back into the sea.

A fisherman noticed the curious behavior of that old man and screamed a warning at him:

“This is what happens here after every storm! Why are you wasting your time like this? What difference does it make?”

The master raised a starfish, so the fisherman could see it. As he was throwing it back into the sea, the poet said:

“It will make a great difference for that one.”



"CROW AND THE MOON"  
KAWANABE KYOSAI - JAPAN (CA. 1887)

## Love letters

Learning to read  
Those love letters  
Written by wind and rain;  
Snow and moon.

## Plan B(est)

You refused me shelter!  
What a nasty person!

But thanks to your kindness,  
I could spend the night  
Under the cherry blossoms;  
Lodged by the moonlight.

## Friendly stalker

Nobody knows of my hut;  
Except the friendly eye of the moon,  
Often spying  
Through the pines.

## Itinerary

A monk approached Joshu as follows:

“Being very disciplined, I try to get the most out of my time. This is my present itinerary...”

Here, the monk presented Joshu with a scroll, meticulously dividing each day of the week into specific activities. He then continued:

“In your enlightened opinion, how should I improve it?”

Joshu said:

“Instead of using the hours, you are the one being used by them. When you said something about ‘getting the most out of my time’, what does it mean?”

## About time

Time is not something that passes.  
Don't see the passing of time  
As the nature of time.

If time could really pass,  
This would imply a difference  
Between time  
And you.

## Eternal

A monk asked Joshu:

“When the scriptures mention that everything  
is eternal, what does it mean?”

Joshu said:

“I am a very close friend to the patriarchs.”

The monk insisted:

“But what does it mean?”

Joshu was sorry for him:

“It seems today I cannot answer it.”

## Not even worth it

Supernatural powers...

People flying around!

Everything you've seen in fantasy Kung Fu movies (you can even find Bodhidharma as the main character in some of those).

Never-ending nonsensical arguments, among arrogant people using empty complicated words as if they were "Hadoukens"; trying to impress and to impose on others with screams and "magic rituals" – liars, pretenders, lunatics and parrots who could never understand the words they were chanting, nor practice what they preached...

Zen was born as a sort of revolt against many popular currents of Buddhism and Daoism in those ancient Chinese days: superstition and mumbo jumbo putting on airs. Zen came shedding all this rubbish and fantasy, to focus only in the fundamental jewel of enlightenment; approaching it in a practical, direct, disenchanted manner.

This context might be embarrassing for some people today, but it is very important when we take a look at Joshu: an eighty-year-old master who experienced enlightenment while still young – an experienced Zen master – returning home preceded by the reputation of great "sage" and "holy saint"; which meant very different things to most people around him and to himself.

The curious and the lost; those incapable of recognizing the truth, obsessively attached to ideas and other illusions; gold diggers; arrogant people, hoping to outsmart the master and steal from him some notoriety; superstitious people,

looking for supernatural blessings...

Joshu was constantly harassed by the flattery and greed of those who are always stinking, while preaching hygiene.

Victim to an incessant bullying, with people always making questions and writing everything down, Joshu usually reacts by alternating three main patterns:

- 1) he would openly point at the truth;
- 2) he would lament the lack of understanding of the Buddhists around him;
- 3) he would often refuse, very emphatically, illusory halos forced upon him, or worn in front of him; *using* him as an excuse.

Here is a lament:

Joshu told the assembly:

“Decades have already passed, since the last real Buddhist student came here and asked me a question. The people coming here will spend the night and eat their meals, but they soon run away to find some warm, comfortable place.”

A monk asked:

“And if real students would appear, what would you tell them?”

Joshu considered this monk for a while and said:

“One doesn’t shoot a mouse with a cannon.”

Now, refusing the holy halo brought to him by a silly monk who was trying to abuse his holiness as a lustful object of desire:

A monk asked Joshu:

“How does it feel, master, being a holy man?”

Joshu said:

“This is like smearing shit all over the clean floor!”

The monk was confused:

“Please, master, explain it to me, for I do not understand.”

Joshu said:

“Go fuck yourself.”

Here, he points directly at truth; questioned by a person we can take for an honest seeker:

A monk asked Joshu:

“How should I apply the mind?”

Joshu said:

“Notice that emperors rule all over the land, but at the moment of their deaths, not a single coin could ever be spent.”

Now, freestyle:

A monk asked Joshu:

“What is a Buddhist temple?”

Joshu said:

“It’s like a virgin girl.”

The monk insisted:

“And a Buddhist temple with a lot of monks in it?”

Joshu said:

“Like a virgin girl, pregnant.”

Joshu found a monk praying in the monastery and beat him with his staff. The monk said:

“Don’t you know that praying is a good thing?”

Joshu said:

“Not as good as nothing.”

Joshu told the assembly:

“Cut off the heads of all the buddhas and you will have some value.”

A monk was shocked:

“What kind of a person would dare cutting off the head of a buddha?”

Joshu looked at him and said:

“Not *your* kind.”

A monk asked Joshu:

“How can I observe the moment?”

Joshu said:

“What?”

“How can I observe the moment?”

“I understood the words you said, but they make no sense to me.”

The monk wondered:

“Will I ever be able to do it, master?”

Joshu said:

“It all depends on you.”

A monk told Joshu:

“Preaching the dharma in this dirty world of ignorance and suffering is like dressing a sweaty worker with clean clothes.”

Joshu said:

“Where the hell do you think I live?”

A monk asked Joshu:

“What is the Way?”

Joshu said:

“Shut up.”

A monk asked Joshu:

“Ordinary people are fond of riches. A monk is fond of what?”

Joshu said:

“Quick! Shut up!”

This monk, however, was too slowish:

“But shutting up, will I get the answer?”

Joshu said:

“But if you don’t, how will you know?”

A monk proudly told Joshu:

“This is a verse I have composed: ‘Incessantly flowing, day and night.’ What do you think?”

Joshu said:

“A monk is not a farmer who must pay taxes over his crops twice a year.”

A monk asked Joshu:

“To sum it all up in a single sentence, what would you say?”

Joshu said:

“Holding on to a single sentence, you’ll become senile.”

A monk asked Joshu:

“What is enlightenment?”

Joshu explained it to him:

“Your question is typical of an idiot.”

A monk asked Joshu:

“What is the inscrutable pith of the deep?”

Joshu explained it to him:

“I guess that you being here, making me this question, is the inscrutable pith of the deep.”

A monk asked Joshu:

“Are those who attained realization also liable to go to hell?”

Joshu confided to him:

“And I am first in line!”

The monk protested:

“But you are such a wonderful person! How could *you* go to hell?”

Joshu explained it to him:

“If I wasn’t already there, how could I have met you here?”

A monk asked Joshu:

“What is the perfect question?”

Joshu said:

“Wrong!”

A monk told Joshu:

“I have no special question. Don’t bother with a special answer.”

Joshu said:

“Extraordinary.”

A monk asked Joshu::

“Please master, show me the Great Way; but without using words.”

Joshu coughed.

Joshu was having tea with a nun. She asked him:

“Master, can you teach me the wisdom that has never been spoken?”

Joshu said:

“The kettle is getting dry.”

The nun ran to the fire and added more water to the kettle. Next, she returned and repeated the same question.

Joshu laughed.

Someone asked Joshu:

“How can we practice to learn the teaching that has never been heard?”

Joshu said:

“Forget about ‘never been heard’... Whatever you’ve being hearing – what is it?”

A monk asked Joshu:

“I have nothing in my mind. How should I proceed?”

Joshu advised him:

“Throw it away.”

The monk remarked:

“But I have nothing, how can I throw it away?”

Joshu said:

“Then take it with you.”

Joshu told the assembly:

“Clay buddhas cannot cross the water. Golden buddhas cannot cross the furnace. Wooden buddhas cannot cross the fire.”

## Maha-Rahulovada Sutra

The sutras about Shakyamuni – the canonical Buddhist texts – precede Chinese Chan in more than a thousand years and have a very different style. Specially, they usually indulge in a palaver that is very alien to Zen. These, however, are the roots of Zen; they have influenced its development and can shed much light over its principles. For example:

How to meditate? Most people are looking for practical “scientific” (or measurable) rules, but those are not the point. Monks are usually very disciplined and, becoming a monk, you will have to learn those *too*. But learning the discipline and neglecting the fundamental point is useless. The fundamental point can be practiced standing, walking, lying down and so on... Sitting is the front gate, but “proper sitting” is not the point.

Practice clarifies itself. Conventions can only point at the moon. Enlightenment is a gateless gate, approachable from all sides. You have to find your own way. I hope this sutra will interest you:

Out on a begging tour, the Buddha and one of his disciples, Rahula, were walking side by side. The King of Boundless Awakening said:

“Everything that has a form, Rahula – be it from the past, the present, or the future; internal or external; overt or subtle; worldly or sacred; near or far away... Everything that has a form must be interpreted according to reality and true wisdom: this does not belong to me; this is not who I am; this is not my identity.”

Rahula, only eighteen years old, expressed a natural doubt:

“And how about the things that have no form, master?”

Shakyamuni answered:

“Everything that has a form, Rahula, and also all the feelings, perceptions, thoughts and our consciousness itself.”

The young one gave up on his begging trip and sat beneath a tree, saying:

“After receiving personal instructions from the Buddha himself, who cares about food?”

Rahula crossed his legs and straightened his back, quieting his mind. The venerable disciple Sariputra arrived a short while later, on his way to beg for food, when he noticed Rahula sat by the tree in meditation. The veteran approached him with an advice:

“A fine meditation technique, my esteemed friend Rahula, is focusing your complete attention on inhaling and exhaling the air as you breathe. When this technique is developed and refined, it produces beautiful fruits of great benefit.”

Late in the afternoon, Rahula got up and went back to camp, where again he joined his master and asked:

“Most Honored One, how can we develop and refine the focusing of our complete attention in the inhalation and exhalation of air, producing beautiful fruits of great benefit?”

Siddhartha replied:

“Everything that has a form, Rahula – be it from the past, the present, or the future; internal or external; overt or subtle; worldly or sacred;

near or far away... Everything that has a form must be interpreted according to reality and true wisdom: this does not belong to me; this is not who I am; this is not my identity. If we must enter into detail, there are five properties of form, which are: earth, water, fire, wind and space.

“The properties of earth can be either internal or external. The internal ones relate to all that is solid or has become solid in a person – like hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, organs, membranes, bowels, the contents of the stomach, the feces and anything else that is internal and solid. This is what we call the property of earth.

“All these must be seen for what they really are and interpreted by true wisdom: this does not belong to me; this is not who I am; this is not my identity. When you see the property of earth for what it really is, you will become disenchanted with the properties of earth, which will be purified in your mind.

“The properties of water can also be internal or external. The internal ones relate to all that is liquid, watery, or oily in a person – like blood, pus, sweat, mucus, tears, saliva, urine and everything else that is internal and liquid. This is what we call the property of water.

“All these must be seen for what they really are and interpreted by true wisdom: this does not belong to me; this is not who I am; this is not my identity. When you see the property of water for what it really is, you will become disenchanted with the properties of water and the illusions about them will be purged from your mind.

“The properties of fire, likewise, can be

internal or external. The internal ones relate to all that is warm or produces heat in a person – like that which heats and ages the body, that which consumes us with fever, that which digests our food and everything else that is internal and has the qualities of fire. This is what we call the property of fire.

“All these must be seen for what they really are and interpreted by true wisdom: this does not belong to me; this is not who I am; this is not my identity. When you see the property of fire for what it really is, you will become disenchanted with the properties of fire and they will be cleansed in your mind.

“The properties of wind, the same way, can be internal or external. The internal ones relate to everything in a person that has the qualities of the wind – like inhaled and exhaled air, the gases in the bowels, farts and burps and everything else that is internal and has the qualities of wind. This is what we call the property of wind.

“All these must be seen for what they really are and interpreted by true wisdom: this does not belong to me; this is not who I am; this is not my identity. When you see the property of wind for what it really is, you will detach yourself from the properties of wind and the illusions surrounding them will be purified in your mind.

“The properties of space, like all the others, can be internal or external. The internal ones are related to everything that is made of space, or that contains space in a person – like ears, nostrils, mouth, anus, the passages used by food and drinks, the interior of the stomach, the lungs, the

inside of the veins and everything else that is internal and made of space. This is what we call the property of space.

“All these must be seen for what they really are and interpreted by true wisdom: this does not belong to me; this is not who I am; this is not my identity. When you see the property of space for what it really is, you will detach yourself from the properties of space and the illusions surrounding them will be purged from your mind.

“Having that in mind, Rahula, what you need to develop is the meditation of being like the earth. When you meditate like the earth, pleasant and unpleasant perceptions from the senses will find no handles from which to hold you. Think of all the things daily thrown into the earth; pleasant things and unpleasant things: feces, urine, spit, pus and blood. The earth is unfazed. It is never horrified, humiliated or disgusted with anything. If you can develop a meditation that is like the earth, attractive and repulsive perceptions from the senses will not control your mind, or attach to it.

“What you should be pursuing, Rahula, is to practice the meditation of being like the water. When you meditate like the water, pleasant and unpleasant perceptions from the senses will find no cracks to hook to your mind. Think of all the things daily thrown into the water; pleasant things and unpleasant things: feces, urine, spit, pus and blood. The water is unfazed. It is never horrified, humiliated or disgusted with anything. If you can develop a meditation that is like the water, your mind will be released from illusory

attachments to attractive and repulsive sensory perceptions.

“Before your meditation can produce beautiful fruits of great benefit, you should practice the meditation of being like fire. When you meditate like the fire, pleasant and unpleasant perceptions from the senses will not control your mind. Think of all the things daily burnt by the fire; pleasant things and unpleasant things: feces, urine, spit, pus and blood. The fire is unfazed; never horrified, humiliated or disgusted with anything. If you can meditate like the fire, attractive and repulsive perceptions from the senses will dematerialize in emptiness.

“Practice the meditation of being like the wind, Rahula. When you meditate like the wind, pleasant and unpleasant perceptions from the senses will stop clinging to your mind. Think of all the things against which the wind blows; pleasant things and unpleasant things: feces, urine, spit, pus and blood. The wind is unfazed. It is never horrified, humiliated or disgusted with anything. If you can develop a meditation that is like the wind, attractive and repulsive perceptions from the senses will neither seduce, nor horrify you.

“Finally, you should practice the meditation of being like space. When you meditate like space, pleasant and unpleasant perceptions from the senses will not control your mind. Think of all the things contained in space; pleasant things and unpleasant things: feces, urine, spit, pus and blood. Space remains unfazed; never horrified, humiliated or disgusted with anything. If you can develop a meditation that is like space, attractive

and repulsive perceptions from the senses will constitute no separate, independent entities.

“Practice the meditation of good will, Rahula, and all the hatred shall be purged from your mind.

“With the meditation of compassion, cruelty will be extinguished.

“With the meditation of gratitude, resentment will disappear.

“With the meditation of forbearance, all sorts of annoyances are destroyed.

“By meditating on repulsiveness, lust will be erased.

“By meditating on the transience of things, your own sense of identity will be exposed as an illusion.

“You should also meditate, Rahula, focusing your complete attention in inhaling and exhaling the air as you breathe. Developed and refined, this technique produces many beautiful fruits of great benefit.

“For this practice, you should go to the woods, or to a quiet and empty room. Sit cross-legged on the floor, or nested by the roots of a tree. Keep your back straight. Focus your attention in the moment.

“When you inhale the air, pay attention to it. When exhaling, pay attention to it.

“During a deep inhalation, we experience ‘I am inhaling deeply.’ During a deep exhalation, we experience ‘I am exhaling deeply.’

“Keeping in mind the unreality of words, you will understand how, inhaling quickly, we experience ‘I am inhaling quickly.’ When exhaling the air very quickly, we experience ‘I am exhaling the

air very quickly.'

"There is no repeating of words to yourself, nor any effort to focus on ideas, but, if we have to put it into words and ideas, this is how we should meditate on our breath: 'I inhale this air with complete awesome presence and experience of my body. I exhale this air with complete awesome presence and experience of my body.'

"We practice 'I exhale calming the reactions of my body' and 'I inhale calming the reactions of my body.'

"We practice 'I exhale experiencing joy' and 'I inhale experiencing joy.'

"I exhale with a satisfied mind' and 'I inhale with a satisfied mind.'

"I exhale experiencing everyday mind' and 'I inhale experiencing everyday mind.'

"I exhale, with a satisfied mind' and 'I inhale, with a satisfied mind.'

"I exhale with a quiet mind' and 'I inhale with a quiet mind.'

"I exhale experiencing unity' and 'I inhale experiencing unity.'

"I exhale immersed in the flow, ' and 'I inhale immersed in the flow.'

"This is how you should focus your attention on breathing while meditating, Rahula. When this is refined, it produces beautiful fruits of great benefit."

## Virtue

Pile up money for your children;  
They will simply spend it.

Collect books for your grandchildren;  
They will not read them.

The best you can do for them  
Is to quietly, secretly  
Improve your own virtue.

Work on this heritage  
For your descendants  
And your efforts will benefit  
Many generations.



"VIRTUE"  
HAKUIN - JAPAN (MID-18TH CENTURY)

## Elixir of life

The children of Shakyamuni  
Can escape countless causalities.

Understanding Nature,  
We learn the emptiness of all knowledge;  
For Great Wisdom is casual, idle  
And even pervades the non-living.

The True Secret has no form;  
It hides out when our minds  
Are wandering in language.

When the Three Worlds become empty,  
The Source of All Things is unveiled.  
When the Six Illusions are purified,  
Troubles become transparent.

To be confident, resolute and enlightened,  
You have to understand the Heart:

When the Heart is purified,  
Brightly it shines.  
When the Heart is sincere,  
Its fragrance imbues every direction.

The Real Appearance  
Knows neither deficiency nor excess  
And it can be seen in life.

Illusory forms will eventually decay;  
Why chase the things that don't belong to you?

The path to meditation  
Involves meritorious deeds  
And sitting in silence.  
The key of cultivating your own conduct  
Is charity and compassion.

The Greatest Skill looks like no skill  
And it understands all great achievements  
As the work of inactivity.

The best plans have no calculation.  
Conscious interventions are a disease.  
It is enough that the Heart won't move;  
Every action will be perfect.

In Emptiness,  
It is absurd to talk of balancing the elements;  
It is ridiculous trying  
To prolong your life with elixirs.

The only important matter  
Is letting go  
Of every bit of causality  
And of each particle of dust,  
Revealing every phenomena  
As empty.

Live simple and pure;  
Relish having few desires.  
Effortlessly, in every moment,  
You will eternally enjoy  
A life without end.

## Difficult to see it

In the cities,  
There are spiraling clouds of dust  
Covering everything.

The particles are flying so fast,  
People are blinded all around the land:

Heavenly beings picking up flowers  
Lose their way home;  
Lumberjacks are disoriented in the woods.

Even if you were carrying  
A very luminous pearl in your own hands,  
It would be difficult to see it.

## Tea is Zen; sword is Zen

In Japan, Zen is related with many forms of art – specially tea ceremony, flower arrangement, archery, swordplay, painting, sculpture, poetry and calligraphy.

Here is a curious story illustrating realization as the central core to different arts:

A tea master unintentionally offended a rough samurai who demanded a duel. The tea-man had no problem throwing his life away, but he wanted to do it properly.

Thinking of consulting with a warrior friend, he made up an excuse and managed to postpone the duel to the next day. At his friend's dojo, he asked the swordsman how to die honorably in that kind of situation. This was also an opportunity for him to practice his art one last time; entertaining his friend with some tea.

As the warrior observed his friend preparing and serving tea – with such a focused skill and spontaneity – he said:

"Tomorrow, try unsheathing your sword and raising it over your head, with both hands on the grip; ready to cut your opponent down as soon as he attacks. In this position, simply adopt the same state of mind you have when you are serving tea."

The next day, the tea-man followed his friend's advice: he raised his long sword and assumed in his mind the same state of focus he experienced while serving tea.

The rough samurai watched him for a long time, before returning his blade to its scabbard, apologizing for his arrogance and walking away.

## Identification

Takano Shigeyoshi, one of the greatest sword masters from recent Japanese history, started learning the art when he was fourteen years old. His father, a sword master himself, died in that same year and the boy was adopted by another sword teacher.

Later, eighty years old and recognized as a great master of the sword, he wrote the following thoughts about his art:

“When the wooden sword is fit to my personal taste – regarding weight, built and other things of this sort – it becomes easier entering a state of identification, so the sword and my body are one.

“It should not be necessary to say that the art of swordplay is doomed as soon as you think about winning the tournament, or flaunting your skill to others. Only by casting away such feelings can you attain a state of identification between you and the sword.

“In the dojo we used to call it the ‘no-mind’, and maybe it corresponds to what the Buddhists call ‘emptiness’. In my own experience, when we can extinguish our thoughts and feelings which are liable to hamper the free flow of activity, we come back to the ‘original mind’ and can naturally move in unobstructed fluidity.

“Some times, when I watch a puppet show, I feel like the puppeteer has attained this same spirit; they employ their whole mind in controlling those puppets. There is no conscious separation between master and puppet. The show is elevated

to the status of ‘art’, in my opinion, if a puppeteer can reach this sort of identification.

“Some people argue about these comparisons, saying puppeteers are ‘nothing but entertainers’, while sword fighters are facing opponents bent on cutting them down. From my own perspective, however, both reach the same mental state of identification, allowing them to attain the same fluidity of consciousness. The activities involved are meaningless.

“When I experience this state of identification, there are no feelings about an opponent trying to cut me down. I feel like also the opponent is a part of myself. All their thoughts and movements, thus, are experienced as my own. From intuition – or some mysterious operation of what they call ‘the unconscious’ – I know how to cut them down, without thinking. From this particular state of mind, it seems very natural to do it.”

## The same rule applies to everything

Shoju Ronin was Hakuin's master. When they first met, Shoju wanted to know why Hakuin had become a monk and Hakuin confessed:

“I was afraid of going to hell.”

Shoju remarked:

“So you're a self-centered little shit, uh?”

Later, Hakuin would describe Shoju as a rough, extremely demanding master who beat and insulted him frequently. Even though Hakuin never received formal recognition from Shoju, he considered himself as a part of his lineage.

A swordsman once visited the monastery to ask Shoju Ronin:

“I was born into a family of samurai and, from my early childhood, I have trained the art of swordplay. For the last few decades, I have trained arduously and passionately under respectable masters from various schools. I have learned all of their secrets. Still, I have not been able to forge a technique of my own, while my greatest dream is to be the founder of an original school.

“Despite my exhausting efforts, the search of a Greater Principle to be the bedrock of my school has been an utter failure. I am now hoping that understanding Zen might help me in this. I am no stranger to Buddhist thought, though I have not grasped its ultimate meaning. Could you clear this matter for me?”

Shoju approached the samurai and punched him three times, with all his power. The warrior fell on the ground and the master kicked him for a while. This experience made the soldier realize

the meaning of Buddhism and, later, he became the founder of his own school.

The case became notorious and the monastery was receiving frequent visits from swordsman seeking the Way. When a group of these fighters organized a tournament, they invited Shoju to watch it as a guest of honor.

When the tournament was over, the winner addressed Shoju with these words:

"You are a great Zen master and certainly have a deep understanding of sword theory. I am ready to admit that nobody here could argue with you about the philosophy of sword fighting. But regarding the actual combat, I hope you are also ready to admit that you are no match against real warriors like us."

The master was himself born into a samurai family and, in his youth, had also trained with the sword. He said:

"If any of you children believes himself able to strike me down with his stick, stop talking so much and just attack me; but I don't think any of you could even touch me in a duel."

One of the samurai said:

"Do you really give us permission to attack you?"

Shoju simply nodded his head. The samurai offered him a wooden sword, but he refused it:

"I am a Buddhist monk! How could I use a sword? I have a large iron fan with me and it will be my weapon. Attack me anyway you want. If any of you can touch me with your stick, I'll grant that he is a competent fighter."

The group formed a line and attacked the

master mercilessly, but his fan seemed to cover the whole world and nobody could find an opening to exploit. One by one, all the samurai were forced to admit defeat.

This case also became notorious and, at the monastery, one of the monks asked Shouju:

“We all know you are a great master of Zen, but how could you beat those warriors with the sword? Is your fighting skill really related to Zen?”

Shouju explained:

“Proper understanding means no obstruction. The same rule applies to everything, including the sword. Ordinary people are too fussy about words, thoughts and conventions. As soon as a flashy word or idea appears, discrimination takes hold of their minds. Ridden by discriminations, the mind is unavoidably led towards attachments and goals. From these attachments and desires, all inner obstructions emerge; entangling the mind in contradictions and disputes. With proper understanding, each object or context is seen as nothing but a part from the same whole. Using a sword in combat is just like doing anything else. Because of the fundamental understanding of Zen, we can confront the multiplicity of things without confusion.”

## Afraid

A group of ten blind masseurs were traveling together on the mountains. At some point, they were crossing a very narrow path and their legs were shaking as they held hands and hesitantly made steps in fear.

Now one of them lost his footing and fell, screaming. All the others were terrified, until the screaming turned into laughter:

“Don’t be afraid! I have fallen, it is true, but it was nothing... I’m fine! Before falling, I was so afraid... My anxiety was unbearable! You want to relax? Then quick: fall!”

## A radical departure from the idea of self

Hyakujo asked Baso:

“What is the highest peak in Buddhism?”

Baso said:

“This is exactly the point where you give up on  
your life.”

## A cornered rat

The following story comes from the records of a traditional school on swordsmanship in Japan. I have no familiarity and zero knowledge about the practice of swordplay; but it is easy to recognize a great writer with meaningful things to say.

Besides, as an artist, I can deeply relate to these lectures given by a cat, and I believe that a great number of musicians, painters, dancers and creative people in general will promptly relate to it too:

Shouken was a talented samurai, once deeply troubled over the prowess of a rat.

This rodent was so audacious, the presence of people and the light of the sun were no deterrent for him to leave his burrow and cause havoc around the house – biting, scratching, dirtying and dropping things down.

The samurai had an old cat and sent her against the rat, but she was no match for such an extraordinary threat. Having her nose bitten, she quickly ran away crying.

The samurai fetched a *boken* [a wooden sword used in practice] and confronted the rat himself.

It was useless.

That rat was no ordinary creature. One could say it defied logic, for it crossed the air like a bolt of lightening. It could escape every strike, ignore every feint. Even before the soldier could learn to follow its movements, the rat had already made a successful leap at his head.

Having your head touched in a duel meant

that you were dead, and this naturally was a great humiliation for a samurai.

Shouken admitted that it was time to hire professionals. Asking around the neighborhood, he quickly assembled a small squadron composed of three tough-looking cats, highly praised by their mastery in the art of catching rats.

After entering the house, however, these cats were furiously attacked by the rat and none among them could oppose it.

News of the marvelous rat spread around the neighborhood and a child eventually approached the house of the samurai, carrying an old cat which he promised could surpass all the other cats in the city, concerning their skills in rat-catching.

Shouken was not at all impressed by the old cat, who didn't look particularly special in any way. But despite his low expectations, he allowed the cat into his house, to confront the cornered rat.

She casually crossed the door, as if unaware of any special event going on in there. The rat, on the other hand, was visibly terrified at the arrival of such an enemy – its eyes were bulging and its body was suddenly petrified.

The grand old cat nonchalantly walked out of the room, carrying the rat between her teeth. The rodent was still immobilized by fear.

Charmed, the samurai invited everyone to a feast, celebrating the capture of that dangerous rat.

The grand old cat was given the seat of honor and the other cats bowed before her. The black cat stepped forward and said:

"All the cats gathered here have been noted for their valor and cunning in the art of catching rats, but who could ever have imagined that such an extraordinary rat existed in this world? We were helpless against it before you arrived, and how easily you carried the day! We would like you to tell us your secrets, but it seems proper that first we should tell you something about ours."

The black cat continued:

"I was born in a family with great reputation for their skill in the art. Since my kitten days, I have been trained in rat-catching. I can jump over a fence, or squeeze myself through a tiny hole meant for rats only. I can perform acrobatic moves and even convince a rat that I am sleeping, while ready to attack when the distance is right. Even the rats running over the beams of a roof cannot escape my advances. But I still have no idea about the powers of that puzzling rat we've met earlier. I am greatly ashamed of my performance today."

The grand old cat said:

"What you have learned is a form of technique. Having a technique as a guide is very important. However, if you are attached to your technique, you limit yourself to it and your mind remains constantly aware of a scheme to defeat others. The masters have devised their techniques so we could get familiar with the pertinent methods and movements in getting the job done. Naturally, the final result is simple and effective. But it is not the art in itself; it is only a visible outcome of its development. Investigating the technique, one can discover the principles of the art. But if you only copy it from the master, focused on the

manipulation of your body and other objects, you are neglecting the fundamental principles, which are much more important, and dealing only with their superficial applications. Still, after training your technique for a long time, you attained a body that is stronger than most and the goal is achieved against the weaker enemy. Also, great technical skill might look impressive. But what does it really amount to?

“Technical skill is certainly an activity of the mind, but it is not the mastery of the mind. It is supposed to be the vessel through which the art moves, and not the art itself. Before it can become invincible, technical skill must be grounded on the Way. When the Way is neglected and only technical skill is aimed at, there is a gap liable to be abused by the enemy. When risking our lives in a duel, it is very important to avoid such a gap.”

The black cat went back to his seat, while a tabby cat stood up to say:

“As the grand cat says, technical skill might look impressive and awe inspiring, but it is not enough to be invincible. The way I see it, the most important facet of fighting is your *chi* [the vital energy which animates all living creatures and pervades everything; a fundamental concept in Chinese culture]. By practicing its balance and cultivation, I have finally developed a powerful chi that can fill heaven and earth. When facing others, my overwhelming chi will immediately surround them; assuring my victory even before the fighting begins.

“I have never felt the need to discipline myself at length in acrobatic techniques, nor do I cling to

conscious plans about movement. I simply use my chi appropriately, according to the situation, and no rat can escape my advances. If a rat were to flee over the beams of a roof, I'd only need to stare at it, and the rat would surely lose its balance and plummet from the heights to become my prisoner. That mysterious old rat we faced today, however, moved about without leaving any trace or casting any shadow. Such a strange skill was far beyond my previous knowledge."

The grand old cat said:

"You have learned to make the most of your spiritual power, but the conscious and deliberate use of that power is counterproductive. After training your chi for a long time, you attained a spirit that is stronger than most. By pouring your own spirit over the spirit of the enemies, you were able to subdue most of them. However, in reality, you can never be sure that your spirit will be the strongest. Be it physically or spiritually, there is always someone stronger.

"Consciously focused on your spiritual power, you may feel like your chi is covering heaven and supporting earth; that it is equal to Mencius' 'flood-like chi' – but that is not so.

"While this planned and laboriously attained spiritual activity might bear some resemblance to the flood-like chi described by Mencius in its bright and luminous nature, the flood-like chi is characterized by inexhaustible vigor, while yours will only grow in vigor according to circumstance.

"Having different sources, these energies have different operations. Mencius' flood-like chi is comparable to a river, incessantly flowing. Your

consciously applied chi is like a temporary flood, lingering after a heavy rain. This flood, however great, can still be carried by a mightier torrent.

“Cornered enemies will often attain a mighty spirit. Their situation is pressing and their fight is for life and death. All hopes of escaping unharmed are easily abandoned. In that frame of mind, any and all dangers we throw at such an enemy will be challenged and fought back. The entirety of their existence will embody a vigorous and fearless chi. As a rule, it is not possible to confront by mere strength – either physical or spiritual – such a steel-like resistance.”

The tabby cat went back to his seat and now an aging gray cat stood up to say:

“Unrivaled grand master! True knowledge is hard to find and again I want to thank you for this wonderful opportunity! I have been listening to your words with the feeling of tasting delicious milk! In my own experience, everything you have said is very real. One can never be sure of being stronger – be it in spirit, or technique. Besides, however powerful a spirit or a body, it will always be accompanied by a shadow when it attacks. A fearsome enemy, or even a cornered mouse, might intuitively take advantage of this shadow – no matter how faint it is. So instead of using force, I have disciplined myself in adopting a passive and flexible spirit.

“When I face a fearsome enemy who is much stronger than me, I simply yield and follow his movements, like a curtain surrendering to a stone that was thrown at it. The curtain *follows* the stone; at once avoiding damage and also folding

itself over the stronger material; containing it. Any rat, however strong, finds no way to fight me; for there is nothing to grasp. That mysterious creature we've faced today, on the other hand, was beyond my understanding. It refused to bend to my strength, but it also refused taking the bait of my passivity. I have never imagined that a rat like that could exist in our world."

The grand old cat said:

"What you call a passive and flexible spirit is not in harmony with the spontaneity of the Way. What you were describing is an artificial creation; a trick forged in your conscious mind. You seem to be always conscious of a scheme; putting effort on eluding the enemy. Because of this, when facing an enemy in a heightened state of sensitivity, he can sense all the subtle spiritual disturbances caused by your conscious efforts and will react to them as a second curtain, following your's.

"When a flexible spirit is artificially produced from conscious effort, it is characterized by short intervals of conscious interruption, disrupting what should work as a continuous flow. This will produce a certain level of muddiness in your heart. This muddiness forms an opaque obstruction which interferes with the sharpness of perception and the agility of your response. This happens when you prevent nature from taking its original course, spontaneously and freely.

"A cornered rat has no thoughts about action and hesitation; with this, he lets nature show its secret face. The cornered enemy will sometimes abandon his life to fate and let nature run its own path, with no traces of conscious obstruction.

“When this state of mind is attained, or even if only momentarily displayed, you will find no shadows, no muddiness, no traces, no floods liable to be defeated, or contained. When such a state is mastered, there are no enemies who can resist its advances.

“The training each of you has undergone so far is of no small significance. It would be wrong to neglect technique, for the Way Without Form can only materialize itself through a container. It would be equally wrong to neglect the chi, for it governs the body and when it is in harmony with nature, we act in perfect accord with situational changes. Finally, it would also be wrong to neglect practicing a flexible spirit, for when this state of mind is attained and spontaneously applied, it can interrupt struggles on the physical plane of combat and resist even against stones.

“However, there is a fundamental point being neglected and this will certainly block you from achieving your full potential: it is the practice of no-mind. One must completely let go of every trace of egotism and self-conscious thoughts; for if the mind harbors such discriminations, all its actions will become limited as little tricks devised by the human intellect; imperfect fruits of desire. This is not in accordance with the Way.

“When the feeling of self-and-other is created by conscious discrimination, people react with alarm to your approach and raise an antagonistic spirit of their own. When you attain the state of no-mind, you are in communion with nature and has no need for artificial contrivances. I am trying to point at something that has no form, talking

about one of its characteristics, but this is far from exhausting the Way; which is a gate with no gate, above all forms of limitation.

“Here is a curious fact about mastering the Way: Some time ago, I’ve met a cat who spent most of her time sleeping, showing no signs of combativeness or spiritual power. She could even be likened to a wooden statue of a cat.

“Nobody in her neighborhood has ever seen this cat hunting a mouse, but also no rats ever dared stand in her presence. When I asked her about the reason for this, she gave me no answer. I repeated my question three times, but she kept silent; until I finally realized that she wasn’t avoiding my question, but simply didn’t know how to answer it.

“This is what the sages meant, when teaching that those who know won’t say a thing, and those who speak don’t really know. That marvelous old cat had forgotten everything about her self, but also forgotten everything about herself. She had become emptiness, attaining the highest level of purposelessness. She was the supreme fighter, practicing divine warship and defeating without killing. I am not to be compared with her.”

Here, with a sore throat from so much talking, the grand old cat went silent and sipped some of her milk. Shouken took this opportunity to say:

“I have practiced the art of the sword for many years, but never grasped its fundamental point. After listening to your words, I feel like I’m closer to realizing the true meaning of the Way. Can you please teach me how to become a true master?”

The cat said:

“I am merely a cat. Rats are my food, and what do I know about human affairs? Having said that, if you’ll forgive me, mastering the art of combat comes from realizing, at a crucial moment, the fundamental source and meaning of life and death. It is not reached by defeating enemies. Hence, a samurai should be disciplined both in a fighting technique and in a spiritual practice.

“Mastery starts by uncovering the source of life and death; by setting your mind free of the mist of egotistic thoughts and experiencing Being directly. When this is achieved, you become free of doubts, distractions, calculations and hesitating considerations. Being meets Being, undisturbed, and your spirit is in harmony with nature; your heart is serene and your mind is empty. This is how we can respond freely and immediately to all the changes incessantly going on around us.

“Ordinarily, differentiation stirs desire and egocentric thoughts into the mind, which starts interpreting the world as ‘me’ and ‘not-me’. From this, contradictions arise. Inhibited by this sort of opposition, the Way becomes restricted. Free and spontaneous expression becomes impossible and death open its jaws, for the clarity of perception and the marvelous workings which are proper to nature are obstructed.

“In such a state of mind, who could gamble their own life against an opponent? Even if you win, it will only be an accident, apart from the art of combat. Earlier, when I was talking about the highest level of purposelessness, of course it doesn’t mean the simple absence of objects in the mind, where an empty void prevails. The point is

that mind in itself has no fixed form. When you hold something in your mind, artificially, your spiritual energy will be imprisoned there. Your original nature will lose equilibrium and become muddy; unable to keep up with the flow.

“When your spiritual energy is gathered at some fixed point, there will be too much energy there and not enough energy at some other point. When there is too much energy, it overflows and cannot be controlled. When there is not enough energy, nurturing is impeded and things wither. Whatever the case, a mind so occupied cannot handle constant transformation.

“But when an idle state of purposelessness prevails, the mind can follow with everything, for it clings to nothing. The energy won’t get out of balance, tending this or that way. Thus, we can transcend both object and subject; we can react spontaneously to transformations while leaving no shadows behind.

“It is written in the *I Ching* (The Book of Changes): ‘*There is no thinking and no acting, but only an absolute quietness with no movement. Only thus can you proclaim the laws of this world from an inner source and unconsciously; one with heaven and earth.*’ If this knowledge is practiced and understood in its relation to the art of combat, one is closer to the Way.”

The people and the animals at the banquet were mesmerized by the cat’s wisdom. After her previous lecture, Shouken remembered to ask her about this:

“Great master cat, you quoted an expression earlier that has always confused me. Could you

please clarify the meaning of ‘transcending both object and subject’?”

Pricking up her ears and lifting her face from the bowl in front of her, looking very serious and dignified – despite her little mouth still dripping milk – the grand old cat replied:

“It is because of the self that we meet enemies. When there is no self, there are no enemies. The enemy represents an opposition – like the fire is opposed to the water, the male to the female and the big to the small. Everything being interpreted by the senses as a ‘thing’ necessarily exists in this form of opposition, or dualism.

“When the mind harbors no symbols, self or ‘things’, conflicts of opposition will spontaneously dissolve. When the mind is free of all the conflicts between antagonistic perceptions fighting for dominance, this is known as ‘transcending both object and subject’.

“Besides, when mind forgets about itself, we experience absolute idleness, or purposelessness; a state of perfect harmony and tranquility. We call it the Great Universal Oneness.

“The very existence of enmity disappears, but it cannot be said that you are aware of it; nor can it be said that you are unaware of it. Your mind is purged from all symbolic creations, interventions and interpretations, as you instantly respond to situational transformations. There is no resorting to the intellect as an intermediary. Thus, even if you are not oblivious to particulars, your mind will not dwell on them, or attach to ‘things’.

“In a state of absolute intellectual idleness, the world and you become one. Subject and object

are unified. There are no differences between right and wrong, or liking and disliking. We hover above all opposing abstractions, for All is One.

“Dualities like pain and pleasure, gain and loss, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are creations of your own mind. Everything you experience and interpret as ‘a world out there’ should actually be interpreted as phenomena created in your mind. An ancient poet says: *‘When a tiny particle of dust enters the eye, the Three Worlds converge into a narrow path. When your eyes are free of objects, notice how life widens!’*

“In other words, if dust gets in your eye, you cannot keep it open. You will lose touch with other parts of the whole and ‘become’ the dust in your eyes. Our sight can be likened to the mind, which by nature has no fixed form. When ‘things’ are crystallized in the human mind, its purity is lost and ‘Three Worlds converge into a narrow path’.

“Another writer had this to say: *‘surrounded by a thousand enemies, my form can be crushed, but Mind is mine and no army could ever threaten it.’* Confucius once wrote this: *‘An army might be robbed of its commander, but even the humblest peasants cannot be deprived of their free will.’* If this free will (or mind) is confused, however, it will turn against itself and obstruct itself; it will become an enemy of itself.

“This is all I can tell you about the Way. I’ve made no whimsical deviation from the traditional teachings of Zen, as even the great masters are powerless in that respect. The Way, of course, is also not limited to the study and practices of the sword. The mental training of the ancient

teachers can be found throughout various forms of art which share realization as a fundamental point.

“But a teacher can only transmit techniques and explain mechanisms that point at the truth. The actual truth must be discovered and realized by yourselves. It is a personal achievement; a form of self-appropriation transferred from mind to mind – like a torch on fire, setting another torch on fire. It is a special form of transmission, apart from linguistic teachings.

“This does not mean that these teachings are useless; they just cannot go beyond pointing at that which you already have in yourself. There are no secrets being confided by the masters to their disciples. Understanding and repeating words is quite easy. Listening is also easy. But the point it to become aware of the truth you already have in yourself, and being able to use it as your own. This is what we call ‘realization’, ‘seeing your own being’, or ‘enlightenment’. These are different names for the same thing. It is like waking up from a dream; like dispelling an illusion.”

## All the arts

Masamune revolutionized the technique of forging the sword known as “katana” and became widely recognized as the greatest swordsmith in the history of Japan.

Legend has it that two sword collectors once were comparing their blades. One of the collectors picked his favorite sword – forged by Muramasa, a disciple from Masamune – and placed it in a stream where several dead leaves were floating on the water. Upon meeting the Muramasa blade, the leaves were perfectly cut.

The other collector picked a Masamune and placed it in the same stream; where the leaves would float around its blade, avoiding it.

## With empty hands

“Kensei” is an honorific title meaning “saint of the sword”. The Japanese apply this expression to swordsmen of legendary skill such as Bokuden, who displayed the highest degrees of perfection in the art, transcending mere technical training.

Widely considered the greatest samurai of his time, Bokuden died some thirteen years before Musashi was born. The following story illustrates the relationship between Zen Buddhism and the Japanese medieval warrior:

Bokuden was crossing the Lake Biwa aboard a ferry-boat that was crowded with all kinds of passengers. Among them was a vulgar samurai, who spoke loudly and arrogantly; boasting about himself as the greatest swordsman of his time.

Elated by the attention he was getting, this samurai was very annoyed to notice someone sleeping nearby – oblivious to his grandiose show of bravado.

He walked to the man who was sleeping (it was Bokuden) and shook him by the shoulders:

“Hey... You also carry a sword, but do you have any talent with it? I am the greatest fighter in our time. There is simply nobody around that I couldn’t beat. But what about you? Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?”

Bokuden said:

“It is true that I’m also carrying swords, but my art is clearly very different from yours. In my own practice with the sword, there’s no ambition about defeating others. I’m only interested in the

art of not being defeated.”

Certainly armed with some “sword pedigree” that he believed impressive, the bully mockingly asked:

“And to which school do you belong?”

Bokuden said:

“My school is known as The One That Defeats the Enemy Even With Empty Hands.”

The bully challenged it:

“But if your school is so magnificent, why do you still carry a long sword?”

Bokuden said:

“This sword is an instrument of detachment from selfish motives. It is not meant for killing or defeating others.”

This conversation, for some reason, infuriated the boastful samurai. He was making gestures with his hands and walking from one side to the other, as if he were on a stage:

“So do you really think you could defeat me without a sword?”

Bokuden said:

“Sure. Why not?”

The bully said to the ferryman, with the airs of an emperor:

“Take us immediately to the nearest island!”

Bokuden intervened:

“The closest island has a large port and people tend to gather around a duel, out of curiosity. For this reason, somebody could get hurt. There is a little deserted island west of the port, however, where we could fight unhindered. It would be a better destination.”

The bully agreed with this and the ferry took

them towards the little deserted island. As soon as they were close enough, the boastful samurai hurriedly jumped on the sand, drew his sword and made himself ready for combat.

Bokuden was still on board, leisurely taking off his swords and giving them to the ferryman.

But instead of following the bully into the sand, Bokuden took the ferryman's oar and pushed it hard against the shore. Nobody was alarmed as he did it, but simply curious, as if under a spell.

Now, the boat was clearly out of reach to the armored warrior, abandoned at the little island. Just as the bully started screaming and cursing, all the passengers started laughing.

## Mr. Dogen grabs the mic

Zen was born in China, pronounced as “Chan”, and later it spread to the East. It was unheard of in India.

When Bodhidharma, the Patriarch, arrived at the Shaolin monastery on Mount Song and spent 9 years doing sitting meditation inside a cave, the people did not yet understand that facet of the teachings of Buddha. Laypeople and even the monks themselves simply called him “the sage who sits and meditates”.

After Bodhidharma, every generation of his followers has practiced zazen [sitting meditation]. People observed this and, not knowing what it meant, started calling them the “Zazen school of Buddhism”. Eventually, the word “za” [to sit] was suppressed and now we call it the “Zen school”.

There are some who are attracted by the grasses, by the flowers, by the mountains and by the waters. Among those, you will find people who attained the Path of Transcendental Wisdom, while knowing nothing of zazen.

There are some who are working the stones, the soil, the mud and the sand – knowing nothing of zazen – and carrying the authentic seal of a buddha.

But zazen is the traditional gate to Zen – and Zen is the genuine gate to peace, happiness and freedom.

One could spread the Buddhist scriptures to cover the whole world; still, the fundamental

lever of the Great Teaching can be found even in a particle of dust.

For this reason, to say that “mind in itself is Buddha” is like the reflection of the moon over a puddle of water. To preach that “sitting itself is Buddha” is like the reflection of the moon over a mirror. These statements are pointing at the same reality. You should take both as the same thing.

Don’t get attached to the elegance of these or those words; to the refinement of this or that logic. Do not search for reality in words. It is ridiculous to believe that simply moving your lips to create sounds, or copying the symbols from this or that sutra could lead people to buddhahood. Attached to this sort of madness, you will move further and further away from the truth.

The mind of the buddhas is inconceivable. It cannot be properly represented in language, nor will it open to those who lack courage, or wisdom. Only the ones who are able to nurture genuine trust can attain this mind.

People who are lacking trust and confidence are unable to accept the mind of a buddha. No matter how much information they gather about it, they cannot attain it. Even at Vulture Peak, the Buddha himself would warn some of the guests, during his teachings:

“You can just leave, whenever you feel like it.”

Hoping a future reader might become a true follower, I’ll say a word on practicing immediate enlightenment.

You should understand that, fundamentally,

you are already immersed in the highest form of enlightenment. It pervades you continuously. But maybe you don't realize it. Maybe you are raising discriminations and treating them as reality.

Without realizing it, you slip away from the Way and your efforts are useless. Your symbolic discriminations will blossom only some superficial flowers.

There is nothing wrong with making theories about the twelve reasons of rebirth, or explaining the twenty five existences. All are free to argue if the Buddhist vehicles are three, or five – if the Buddha was a real person, or a symbolic figure. These are not forbidden. Just don't take all this blabbering for "practicing Buddhism". This is *not* "practicing Buddhism".

Sit in zazen; wholeheartedly. Uncover the Buddha-body and let go of all "things". Skipping over the fence betwixt illusion and enlightenment; breaking down the tunnel separating sacred and profane; unchained by common-sense – you feel instantly at ease. Satisfied, you are nurtured by marvelous realization.

When you practice zazen, even for a second – when the body and the mind, and also feelings and thoughts are unified into the Buddha-body – the ten thousand things become The True and Perfect Body of the Buddha; heaven and earth are pure enlightenment.

This enlightenment reverberates and opens a path to guide you in the unseen. Doing zazen, we drop away body and mind. These activities have no form. Deconstructed immovability is the Way to instant realization.

Because enlightenment is already within your own nature, it is discovered without moving an inch. Discrimination is like a knife, dividing the Buddha-body and trying to make it graspable. If you let go of the knife, you will soon discover the Buddha-body at your fingertips.

In deconstructed immovability, the objects and the mind are unified. In a fluid and receptive state of focus – without disturbing your nature; without moving an inch – you engage the Buddha-activity.

The ten thousand things, when embraced like this, will radiate a wonderful light and tirelessly preach the Great and Inconceivable Dharma.

This is what happens when you sit down like a hammer, striking at emptiness. But even apart from zazen, these marvelous reverberations are constantly pervading everything.

How could enlightenment be restricted to a time and a place? All the ten thousand things are manifesting the original practice, the original face and the original heart of all buddhas; without end.

However, Shakyamuni himself gave us this wonderful technique of sitting meditation and all the buddhas since then have practiced it. This is the reason we recommend zazen as the front gate to Buddhism.

Sit down and find the buddha that is already in you. Searching for the Buddha outside our own heart – as something external – the Buddha becomes a demon.

## Fire, fuego, fogo, feuer

Fire, fuego, fogo, feuer, 火, hi, huoi, 火, вогонь – in different human communities, the same idea has been expressed by different configurations of scribbles and sounds. All the examples of reality inspiring these different words would burn you in the same way.

*“The lonely human reaching for reality – for the hidden truth about the fire, in a World of Ideas – discovers the perfect mathematical description of the fire and, only then, fire became real in our world!”* This is certainly NOT how things happen.

Human beings, wherever they were, bumped into examples of this phenomenon we call “fire”. Naturally and spontaneously, these different “universes” of representation were stirred into their minds: an image, a sound, a tactile feeling, a smell, a taste and an idea.

This idea, initially, was not a word. Different words were agreed upon, with time, by different communities. All these different words surface from the same fundamental human nature, or the same natural reaction: the spontaneous rise of an idea (or symbol) in the human mind, upon contact with the fire (fuego, fogo, feuer...). The ideas are naturally and spontaneously produced in our minds; and also images, sounds, flavors, tactile feelings and odors.

In other words, language should be thought of as one of the universes of inner representation we call “senses”. This word “senses” is misleading. Here, we will call them “representations”.

We should think of language as some inner

universe of representation, inhabited by ideas, or “symbolic objects of the mind”. Our sight is also an inner universe of representation, inhabited by the visual objects of the mind. Our hearing, too, is an inner universe of representation, inhabited by the audible objects of the mind.

Human language could never “grant access to reality”, because its nature is that of a subjective inner universe of representation in the human mind; fundamentally different from reality itself.

Consider, for example, the inner universe of our sight. Are these things we see “reality itself”? Take a good look at your finger (or think about taking a good look at your finger). The image you can see of your finger is not your finger; the image and the finger don’t even occupy the same space! When you look at a mountain far away, should we believe the image you see and the mountain itself are in the same place?

This colorful, three-dimensional image you “see” of your finger is formed *FROM* it. If we are to trust those trying to measure reality, that image occupies a place in your brain; not in your finger. Looking at a mountain far away, the mountain you see is *in you*; not *out there*. It’s a fact.

Still, we usually interpret the images we see as something “out there”, because we mostly guide ourselves around the objects “out there” based on the images *from* them, formed behind our eyes, in our minds. Those images inhabit an inner, virtual universe, that is necessarily different from things as they are. Our ideas share this same nature.

As *representations* of the world “out there” – instigated by the slice of reality that our eyes are

sensible to – most of us can experience a virtual inner universe of “sight”. The same goes for our hearing and so on...

From a common-sense point of view (or due to the nature of our sensible apparatus) “what we see” and “what we hear” are perceived as different things. However, both are inner representations in human consciousness – both are “paintings”, in different kinds of canvases, representing the same moment from a single electromagnetic spectrum.

The world happens simultaneously and as a whole, but living beings experience it partially, by representation. Language, or thinking, is not to be imagined “above” the others in nature; it is only “above” the others in human skill.

This is a human consciousness: stimulated by the transformations of absolute reality (which definitely exists and of which we are all part) we create multiple personal universes, through which we can transit by means of our attention (either intentionally or not).

This is a human consciousness. Of course, the reality of what we are also exists where there is no consciousness, and we are also affected by things not represented in our consciousness, which is only a part of us.

Our inner universe of sight is only a part of consciousness; the same goes for our language. These are only parts of a part of us. None of them contains our identity.

Of course, these too are only *ideas* we have been sharing in this text. If I hope to have painted a clear picture contradicting the identification of

human language with human self, also these words and ideas about “representations” are still representations; sloppy ones – by no means final, or exhaustive – made in a hurry as a workaround, from convenient ready-made pieces of junk lying close by.

People who lived before us have left us these conventions and we are simply using them to point at unconventional reality. We are just using words as words. Even if these words might be pointing at reality, there is no reality in them.

These “inner human universes” we have been talking about can be privileged or neglected; with a correspondent impact over their experienced richness.

Our sense of smell, for example, is currently undeveloped; it was probably more useful and used in more detail in primitive times. Nowadays, we usually pay no attention to it and it becomes somewhat “muted”.

But this balance might always change, like for a person who lost their sight, for instance; their hearing, touching and smelling will become more vivid and more important. If you simply close your eyes and pay attention for a couple of minutes, you’ll be more sensitive to smelling and hearing.

Our social and cultural environments – our education – have a great impact over this “balance of the senses”. Scholars have often referred to our present society as “The Society of Show”, or “The Society of Image”. Certainly enough, the universe of sight is privileged among us. We trust *a lot* in it. We pay a lot of attention to it. We attribute a

lot of importance to what we see, and how we're seen. Much of our pleasures and fears are related to it.

We have also described ourselves recently as "The Information Society", which reinforces the "measuring-mania"; the almighty importance we project at our thoughts; misinterpreting them as "ourselves" or "more real than stones".

We guide our movements by what we see, but we usually believe our thoughts are in control. Why?

For the same reason some believe "reality is only that which can be measured".

Without realizing our language is one of the inner human universes of representation (which we access through our attention) – and owners of a language with no equal in the world we know; with nothing else to compare us to – we tend to an ontological identification between ourselves and our universe of ideas; mistakenly experiencing it as a separate, independent entity living "inside of us"; controlling what we do. Instead, our thinking can only *think* of what we do. It paints pictures with ideas. It doesn't really control anything.

This phony feeling of "being" our thoughts, to the detriment of everything else we experience and do, is not a natural feeling. It is something we have learned from our culture – other cultures had different ideas. Some say Westerns are crazy for imagining themselves as something in their heads.

Your thoughts are not *you*. Your thoughts are

not the master of you. You do not control your thoughts. Your thoughts do not control anything in you.

These things cannot be measured, so maybe it is natural that our society has no idea how to deal with them. Let's make it simple:

Are you breathing, or are you being breathed?

The beating of your heart should be taken as an action from you, or from someone else? Who is digesting the food you eat?

Your thoughts cannot control these things; which are undeniably things you do. Your thoughts do not govern them; do not program them – all they can usually do here is to mess things up, spoiling the natural course of events; which your body knows without thinking.

How could your thoughts “be” you, if they know so very little about you?

Besides, if you think you’re in control of your thoughts (more in control than you are of your hearing) come join me in a both-ends approach. Please, consider if any of these conditions are known to you:

- You really wanted to focus on something and to think of that something, and maybe to study that something; but your thoughts are resolved on occupying themselves with something else...

- You really wanted to stop thinking about something, but your thoughts insisted on it, quite diligently...

One can “control” their thoughts almost like some men can write their names while peeing – one can also hold or force their urine to a certain

extent, but urine comes from us naturally and spontaneously; it is affected by our environment, health, things we have ingested and so on. You can certainly *affect* it, but not *control* it. It is not you. It is a part of you. Something that happens to you, or in you.

Try to count from 1 to 10, without thinking of an elephant...

Trying to “think of not thinking” is useless, because your thoughts can’t “do” anything. Can you “not hear” something sounding in your ears? Your thoughts cannot avoid representation either, when some excitement stirs them into being.

Way deeper than your thoughts, in you, and much more “in control” (though mostly unnoticed by everyone) is your attention.

By focusing your attention in one of the other universes of representation, thoughts clear away by themselves. This is beginner’s meditation: you focus your attention on your breathing; you focus your attention on sounds; on the flame of a candle in a dark room. You can even pinch your skin and focus your attention there. Doing this, you can cut off your thoughts; because it is your attention that will determine your experience.

Focusing your attention away from thoughts is a start. The goal is pulverizing, or sprinkling your attention, omnidirectionally. Words fail here. I’m trying to describe something unspeakable and unmeasurable.

For example, this “*pulverizing your attention*”. Using words like “*relaxing your attention*” could probably describe it better to some. With your

sight, too, you can focus on something specific, or “relax” your eyes to take it all together in one gulp, continuously. These words are only words.

Not only that, as long as you make a drawing with ideas and focus on these ideas, you will be limiting yourself to them. These words and ideas here are pointing at something different from words and ideas – they are trying to point at their living source and inspiration, which is naturally larger than words and ideas coming out of it, *about it*. This has infinite perspectives; it has infinite applications – like a single dog could be the model to countless paintings, while being necessarily different from all of them. You have to see it for yourself.

The first step is non-thinking. As long as you can't experience, for yourself, that you are more than thoughts and that thoughts don't necessarily have to inspect and interpret everything, so that your life can keep on going, none of these ideas will turn Zen. Don't think about it. Play with your attention. Your thoughts die. Your life continues.

Your attention can move between the inner universes of representation; giving shape to your life's experience. It is still not you, but it is closer. In you, it is above sight, hearing and thinking. It cannot control their form, but it can control which will occupy you. This is a start, away from thoughts.

This language of ours – attracting most of our attention and being interpreted as our very selves – it is only a part of us. It is really wonderful and

unique – because of it, we can have special magic relations with our friends, with Socrates, with our mothers... But a “human” is much more than that and can experience much more than that, because we exist in a reality that is far much larger than our language.

Limiting reality to measurements is sickening to humans. It is a partiality, favoring unbalance.

Our thinking is only a little part of us. It has no access to most parts of us. Whatever access it does have, will always be limited by its nature of symbolic representation; an inner universe of ideas in the human consciousness.

Even after reasoning about this pathological identification between language and self – of the nonsensical feeling that we are our thoughts and that our thoughts control our lives and experience – turning this *data*, or *information*, into actual *Buddhist knowledge* might prove difficult to some; it is like an eye trying to look at itself, or a knife trying to cut itself.

Still, as long as we can't do it, we will remain like primitive peoples who believed earthquakes and storms were manifestations of some angry gods, supposedly plotting their intrigues from the top of a hill.

When gods fall from the hills, people can put their feet on the ground. With our feet on the ground, we get closer to what we really are. When we are closer to what we really are, our actions are more effective; opportunities for realization become much larger.

Of course nature keeps many secrets away from our intellect, in the same way we cannot see, hear, or touch everything.

Language is certainly more immersive and advantageous from our human point of view; but not from reality's.

From a dog's point of view, maybe smelling is more immersive. Dogs can clearly think, but not like us. We, too, can clearly smell, but not like them.

If the particularities of human thinking have endowed us with something unique, in the social accessibility and historic accumulation of "objects" in our language, its nature remains the same as those other representations we call "senses". It is only a part of us; a virtual universe in us. It is not the human self, not God, nor a gate to reality.

By transcending language – by meditating and not-thinking – we can experience and verify these statements by ourselves.

Scientists like to boast about their relation with "evidence" – their "skillful and assured way to uncover reality" – but, at the same time, we all know that every great revolution in science was initially met by general rejection and sometimes even hatred, regardless of the evidence. Max Planck himself wrote that "*a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.*"

Sir Isaac Newton declared once that "action at a distance" (stuff like magnetism, a tv remote, or

wi-fi) was inconceivable. “*It is so absurd, I believe no person endowed with the ability to think with any competence by our philosophic standards would ever believe in such ignorance. If we had to accept this possibility, we would also have to admit we have no knowledge about the phenomena in the natural world.*”

Semmelweis – the first physician to suggest washing hands between the morgue and the birth room – was ridiculed and persecuted by his peers.

Contrary to views coming out of materialism, the piling up of examples is useless. Understand it immediately. Approach it with your whole stored experience, and not as an isolated group of ideas. From one thing, understand a thousand.

Enough mud for me. This title “to anybody” comes with strange demands. We even had to move away from Zen, to pass it all around – down to the last monkeys.

Now I shall return, almost euphoric (like a child arriving at the beach) to my comfortable muddyless inaction – having the clouds as my best neighbors and washing my ears in the continuous sound coming from the mechanized stream of cars passing beneath my window.

The voice of Buddha is a little hoarse; that's all.

It is still wonderful.

From the beginning, without end.

Belo Horizonte, 2019  
Daniel Abreu de Queiroz

*\*Bonus disclaimer of the Amazon Beggar:*

*As an independent author, busily fighting alligators and monkeys for food all over the Amazon jungle, my books have no means of propagation other than your reviews and recommendations.*

*So if you did enjoy this nonsense and wish more people could read it – please, kindly sprinkle it with some of your stars :)*

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